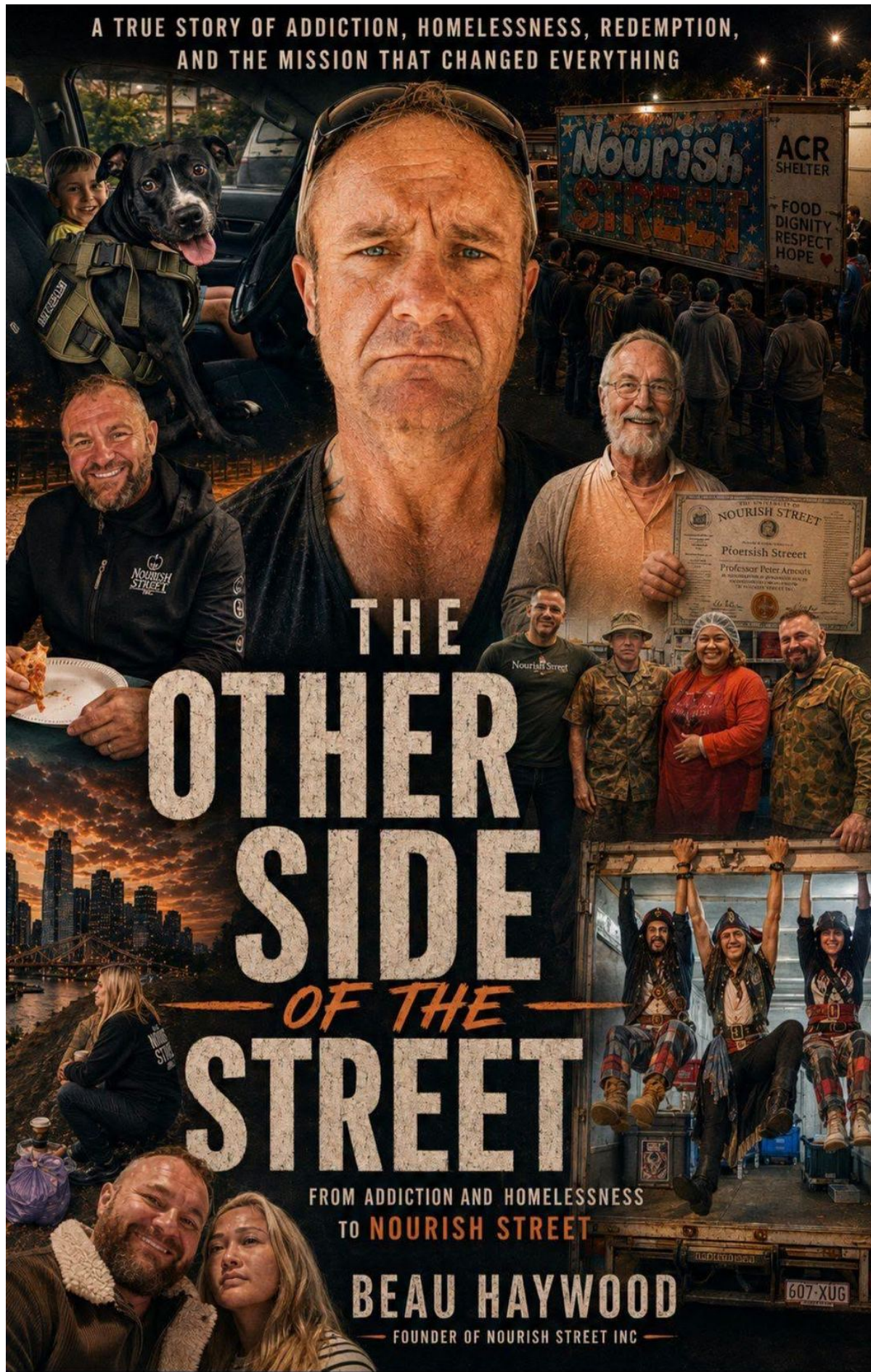




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A few words before the story.

**MY STORY. MY LIFE.**

My Story. My Life.

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FOREWORD

Foreword

The Other Side of the Street is not a story I ever imagined I would write.

There are parts of my life in these pages that I once wished I could erase. Addiction, homelessness, loss, fear, mistakes and moments when I genuinely did not know if I would make it through another day. But there are also parts I would never want erased, because somewhere amongst all of that darkness I discovered love, compassion, purpose and just how powerful people can be when they refuse to give up on one another.

I have not written this book because I have all the answers. I have written it because I have lived on different sides of life. I have been the person struggling, the person who needed help, the person who pushed people away, and eventually the person fortunate enough to be in a position to help others.

Some of these pages were difficult to write. Some brought back memories I had buried for years. Others reminded me just how far life can change when someone is given another chance.

If there is one thing I hope you carry from this book, it is that we should never judge somebody's entire life by the chapter we happen to meet them in.

Sometimes all it takes is one person to believe there might still be another chapter.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated first and foremost to my partner, Jenny.

You have seen me at my worst and watched me fight my way towards something better. You have sacrificed more than most people will ever know, and so much of the life I have today would not exist without you.

To my sons, Kane, Zion and Isaac. You are three of the greatest reasons I kept fighting. I hope that when you read these pages, you understand that your dad was far from perfect, but he never stopped trying to become a better man. I love you boys so much.

To every person who is struggling with life right now, whether through addiction, homelessness, grief, loneliness, mental health challenges or

circumstances that feel impossible to escape. Your story is not finished.

To every person sleeping in a tent, a car, a park, a doorway or somewhere they never imagined they would call home, you deserve to be seen as a human being before you are seen as a circumstance.

To the incredible volunteers, supporters, businesses, organisations and everyday people who have helped build Nourish Street, thank you. You have restored and strengthened my faith in humanity. You have shown me what can happen when a community stops asking whose problem something is and starts asking how it can help.

To the people who gave me another chance when I needed one, and to those who trusted me enough to allow me into their lives when they needed one, thank you.

And finally, this book is dedicated to anyone who has ever believed their past has already decided their future.

It hasn't.

MY STORY. MY LIFE.

My Story. My Life.

A note before you read: These memoirs deal with addiction, homelessness, loss, trauma and some very dark periods of my life. Some details have been left out due to their deeply personal nature and to protect the privacy of others.

My story. My memoirs.

For a long time, people have told me I should write a book.

So I finally have.

This book is my story.

It contains a lot that I have never shared publicly. Some of it hasn't even been shared with many of the people closest to me.

These chapters are written from my memories, my experiences and my perspective of the life I lived.

Some parts will be confronting.

This story deals with childhood trauma, grief, addiction, homelessness, suicide attempts and other experiences that may be difficult for some people to read.

Reader discretion and, perhaps more importantly, an open heart are advised.

I've deliberately kept each section short so I can share these memoirs here on social media, one piece at a time.

Every day I'll post another part, starting right at the beginning and working through the good, the bad, the ugly, and eventually to where life has taken me today.

This isn't just the story of Nourish Street.

It's the story of everything that came before it.

I grew up isolated on a farm, in a deeply religious environment, believing we were living in the last days.

At 14 or 15 years old, I ran away and found a father I hadn't seen since I was six.

When I turned up at his door, he didn't recognise me.

From there came alcohol, marijuana, methamphetamine, around 25 years of addiction, relationships, fatherhood, homelessness, some incredibly dark places, and eventually rehab.

Then came 1 October 2023.

Sobriety.

And somehow, out of everything that came before, came Nourish Street.

Today I spend my nights walking through parks and streets helping people living through circumstances I understand more than I sometimes wish I did.

These memoirs aren't written to make me look like a hero.

Far from it.

There are things in my past I'm proud of, things I'm ashamed of, people I've hurt, mistakes I've made, and parts of my life that aren't easy to revisit.

I won't sanitise my past to make myself look better, but there are some parts of my story that I won't share publicly because of their deeply personal nature.

Some experiences involve other people whose privacy deserves to be protected.

This is my story, but not every part of somebody else's story is mine to tell.

What I do share will be as open and truthful as I can make it.

I'm sharing these memoirs because if my life has taught me anything, it's that you can't look at somebody during the worst chapter of their life and assume you know how their story ends.

I certainly never imagined mine would end up here.

One short section at a time.

One every day.

□ THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET

CHAPTER 01

THE LAST DAYS

My childhood wasn't always unusual.

In the beginning, life was reasonably normal.

Then my mother found religion.

And slowly, almost everything changed.

Mum became involved with the SDA Reform movement, and religion began shaping virtually every part of our lives.

Church was on Saturdays, not Sundays.



But eventually, we didn't even go to church.

Mum became concerned that church itself could expose us to bad influences, so our world became smaller and more isolated.

Birthdays disappeared.

Christmas disappeared.

Things other kids probably took for granted simply weren't part of our lives anymore.

We lived on farms in the middle of nowhere and became what people today would probably call doomsday preppers.

We were poor. Really poor.

Money was something we simply didn't have.

We lived in run-down rental farmhouses and made do with whatever we had around us.

For years, we lived without electricity. That meant no television, No radio, No refrigeration.

We cooked our meals over an open fireplace in the lounge room.

Mum made our bread herself.

And when I say bread, I'm being generous.

Some of those loaves were so bloody tough she literally used a saw to cut them.

Our milk wasn't dairy milk. Mum made it from soya beans.

Vegetables came from a garden beside the house, where we grew much of what we ate.

Fruit was often bought dehydrated because without a refrigerator, keeping fresh food wasn't always practical.

We didn't eat meat or dairy. Everything was basic.

Firewood wasn't something we cut just to have a cosy fireplace on a cold night. We needed it to cook.

This was simply everyday life.

Looking back, there's almost something funny about that bread. But as a kid, I didn't really know any different.

This was home.

But one of the things I wanted more than almost anything else was an education.

I was supposedly homeschooled, although very little actual education was given.

And that wasn't what I wanted.

I often asked Mum if I could go back to school.

I wanted an education., I wanted to learn.

But every time I asked, the answer was no.

In the world we were being raised to believe in, education didn't really have much purpose.

Why spend years preparing for a career or building a future when we believed the end times were coming?

If being persecuted for our beliefs and eventually running to the hills was going to be our future, what was the point of school?

At least, that was the thinking.

But as a kid, I wanted something different.

I wanted to go to school like other children.

I wanted an education.

I wanted friends.

I had none.

There weren't other kids coming over after school.

There were no birthday parties, sleepovers or afternoons hanging around with mates.

Instead, my days were filled with work, religion and whatever freedom I could find for myself on the farm.

I had a part-time job with a neighbouring farmer, helping milk around 300 cows morning and evening.

Back home, there was firewood to cut because we needed it for cooking our meals.

Then there was Bible study..Hours of it.

It wasn't optional.

Several hours could be spent studying the Bible because preparing ourselves spiritually for what was supposedly coming was considered far more important than preparing me for an education or career.

And what was supposedly coming terrified me.

I was raised believing we were living in the last days.

The end of the world wasn't some distant religious idea.

It was real, It was coming.

I believed Christians would eventually be persecuted for their beliefs and that we could be forced to flee into the hills.

When you're a child and your mother tells you something is true, you believe her.

And when you're isolated from most of the outside world, there aren't many other voices around telling you anything different.

It affected the way I thought about the future before I'd really even had the chance to understand what a future was.

But there was one place where I could get away from all of it.

My farm bike.

When I wasn't working, cutting firewood or studying the Bible, I'd get on that bike and run absolutely amuck around the property.

Looking back, those hours probably gave me something I didn't have much of anywhere else.

Freedom.

For a while, there was nobody telling me what the end of the world was going to look like.

Nobody telling me what I was supposed to believe.

Nobody telling me there was no point planning for a future.

Just me, a farm bike and as much of the property as I could tear around.

I was still a kid.

And despite everything, there were times I got to behave like one. That's important to me when I look back.

Because I don't want to rewrite my childhood and pretend every moment was miserable.

It wasn't.

And despite everything I've written about those years, there's something incredibly important to understand about my mum.

She was my everything.

I didn't agree with the way she chose for us to live, especially as I got older and started wanting to experience more of the outside world.

But she was all I had. Mum sacrificed enormously for her children.

Looking back as an adult, I can disagree with many of the choices she made while still understanding why she made them.

She genuinely believed what she was doing was right.

When birthdays and Christmas disappeared, when our lives became increasingly isolated, and when I was denied the education I desperately wanted, I don't believe Mum thought she was hurting us.

In her mind, she was protecting us.

She believed the world was approaching its final days and that the sacrifices she was making were helping protect her children's eternal salvation.

That's an important distinction.

Because this isn't a story about a mother who didn't love her children.

Quite the opposite.

My mum loved us enough that she was prepared to give up almost everything because she genuinely believed it would save us.

I just wish the beliefs she put so much faith in hadn't cost us so much along the way.

Because eventually those beliefs became connected to something far more serious than birthdays, Christmas or school.

My mother strongly believed in natural therapies.

Those beliefs were heavily reinforced by the religious environment surrounding us.

Then Mum got cancer.

She didn't seek conventional medical treatment straight away.

At the time, I couldn't possibly understand what all of that would eventually mean.

I was still a kid trying to understand a world I'd barely been allowed to experience.

By fifteen, I wanted out.

So I ran away.

Somewhere outside that farm was another parent.

My father.

I hadn't seen him since I was six years old.

Nine years.

More than half my life.

I went looking for him.

Eventually, I found him.

It turned up at his door.

He looked at me.

And he didn't recognise me.

His own son was standing in front of him.

And he had no idea who I was.

I'd spent years wanting to see what existed outside the world I'd grown up in.

I was about to find out.

And I was completely unprepared for what came next.

Within another year, at just sixteen years old, I would also lose my mother to cancer.

The person who had been my entire world was gone.

And despite all the things I'd disagreed with, all the things I'd wanted to escape from, I would have given anything to have her back.

The world I'd known was disappearing.

Another one was opening in front of me.

Alcohol. Marijuana. Eventually meth.

But I didn't know any of that yet.

At that moment, I was just a fifteen-year-old kid standing at his father's door.

Waiting to be recognised.

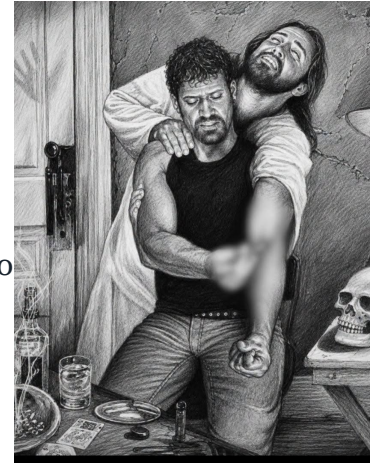
CHAPTER 02

THE OTHER SIDE OF LIFE

My parents separated when I was around five years old, and I hadn't seen my father since I was about six. By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, he was almost a stranger to me.

After growing up so isolated and sheltered from the outside world, I reached a point where I couldn't take it anymore. Following an argument with my mother, I made the decision to leave.

In the middle of the night, while everyone was asleep, I ran away from home and went looking for my father.



I had no real plan for what would happen when I found him. I just knew I had to leave.

I still remember turning up on his doorstep. I had hitchhiked nearly 600 kilometres, it was zero degrees, i froze as i slept under a flax bush that night. Running on little more than determination and a need to find answers.

When he opened the door, he didn't recognise me.

I was his son, standing right in front of him, and he had no idea who I was.

Once I told him who I was, he asked me where my mum was.

I told him I had just hitchhiked all that way to find him.

Without much hesitation, he put me straight in the car and drove me back towards the farm. I remember the silence during that drive and the weight of everything unspoken between us.

When we arrived, I recall my mother saying to him, "No, you have him now. I've had him for the past nine years of his life. He's a bad influence on his younger siblings. He's from the devil."

Being described as "from the devil" wasn't a complete shock to me. I had heard my mum's church elders speak about me in those same terms on several occasions while I was growing up.

But this time was different. I felt rejected by my mother and cast out for running away, yet I didn't exactly feel wanted by my father either. At fourteen or fifteen years old, I suddenly found myself caught between two parents and two completely different worlds, without really feeling like I belonged in either of them.

For years, I had heard my mum tell me, "Your dad's a bad man." But as I got older, I had convinced myself that perhaps she was simply a woman scorned. I wanted the opportunity to know him for myself rather than judge him through somebody else's eyes.

So I stayed with him.

It didn't take long before I began to realise that my father lived in a world completely different from the one I had grown up in.

A couple of weeks after I arrived, Dad asked if I wanted to go for a drive with him. We got into the car and headed to Flaxmere. Eventually, we pulled up outside a state house.

One of the first things I noticed was a dog at the gate with some of the worst mange I had ever seen. We walked past it and towards the house. The front door was slightly ajar, and we went inside.

Nothing in my childhood had prepared me for what I saw.

There were three people passed out on a couch, surrounded by drug utensils. I had never been around anything like it before. I didn't really understand the world I had just walked into.

But something about it was strangely familiar.

Growing up in a deeply religious environment, I remembered seeing a drawing once or twice of Jesus with his arms wrapped around a person injecting drugs. Until that moment, drugs had been something distant to me, almost like something that existed only in pictures or stories.

Now it was right in front of me.

That was when I began to understand what my mother had been talking about. My father lived a very different kind of life.

And that visit wasn't the only exposure I had to it. Marijuana and other substances were around me during those months. I can still vividly recall the smell in the kitchen when other substances were being cooked up. At the time, much of what I was seeing and smelling was completely foreign to me. I had gone from barely knowing this world existed to suddenly living around it.

Dad enrolled me in a local school. After years of isolation and very little conventional education, suddenly being thrown into a normal school environment was incredibly difficult. I was shy, withdrawn and socially awkward. I was the outsider, and I knew it.

The school itself was rough, and I had very few of the social skills other kids my age had developed naturally over the years. They had grown up around other children,

television, music, trends and everyday life. I hadn't.

I was trying to learn how to be a normal teenager while, at the same time, discovering a side of the world I had barely known existed.

Marijuana and other substances were part of my surroundings during this period, and they certainly influenced what came later, but they weren't filling some great hole inside me at this stage. I wasn't yet the person I would eventually become, and addiction hadn't taken control of my life.

For around six months, I stayed with my father.

Those months opened my eyes to an entirely different world. I had gone from one extreme to another: from an isolated and deeply religious childhood to being exposed to drugs, and a lifestyle I had never witnessed before.

In one world, I had been told what to believe and sheltered from almost everything outside it. In the other, I was suddenly exposed to things I barely understood.

Neither world really taught me where I belonged.

And before long, something happening back home would pull me towards my mother again.

She was getting sick.

CHAPTER 03

A TASTE OF FREEDOM

After around six months living with my father, I made the decision to return home. While I had been away, Mum and I had kept in contact through letters. She told me she hadn't been well, and as time went on I became increasingly concerned about her. Eventually, I decided I needed to go back.

Before returning, we made an agreement. I would be allowed to attend the local school, and I wouldn't be forced back into the religious lessons and restrictions I had grown up with. Unfortunately, the agreement lasted only a couple of weeks.

When things began returning to the way they had been before I left, I knew I couldn't stay. This time I didn't go back to Dad. I managed to get onto the Independent Youth Benefit and found a family closer to Matamata who were willing to let me board with them.

Mum and my siblings were still living on our farm, about 18 kilometres outside Matamata near the base of the Kaimai Range. It wasn't an enormous distance, but at fifteen, without reliable transport, getting between the two worlds wasn't always straightforward.

The family I boarded with lived on a farm too, but this was completely different from the isolated farm life I had known. They were really cool people who accepted me and treated me like part of their family. They had boys around my own age who attended the same school as me, and they were probably just as rebellious as I was. We got along well, and for the first time in my life, I had mates.

The school in Matamata was also a much better fit for me than the rough school Dad had enrolled me in while I was living with him, but that didn't mean it was easy. Academically, I was behind, and socially, I was awkward. After growing up so isolated from the outside world and receiving very little conventional education, I felt like a misfit walking into a normal school at fifteen. I didn't really know how I was supposed to act, so I did what a lot of teenagers do: I faked it and tried desperately to fit in.

My education was important to me. I wanted to learn, catch up on everything I'd missed and give myself some kind of future. For the first time, I was beginning to see that there might actually be a future worth preparing for.

Socially, school introduced me to something else that had been largely missing from my upbringing: girls. I could actually talk to them. Growing up, talking to girls had



basically been forbidden. Girls were often referred to as "Jezebels", and Mum had warned me plenty of times that I needed to watch out for them. And watch out for them I certainly did.

Of course, I was also fifteen, and puberty was alive and well. My hormones were raging, my voice and body were changing, and unfortunately my skin was changing too. Acne had well and truly arrived. All of those normal teenage changes were happening at once, but because of the way I'd grown up, I didn't really have anyone explaining them to me. I was trying to figure out my changing body, hormones, attraction and relationships at the same time as I was trying to figure out how the rest of the world worked. Suddenly being surrounded by girls my own age certainly didn't make the hormones any quieter. It was another part of growing up that I was simply learning as I went.

At fifteen, living around Matamata with a group of equally rebellious mates, there was plenty of opportunity to run amok, and we certainly made the most of it. I looked older than I was, so buying alcohol wasn't particularly difficult. Weekends often involved underage drinking at Matamata's only "nightclub". We did some incredibly stupid things too, like riding three-up on a scooter into town while intoxicated.

When Matamata wasn't exciting enough for us, we'd pile into the Datsun and head for Hamilton to explore the city's nightlife. More often than not we'd be rejected at the door, which wasn't exactly surprising considering we were only fifteen, but every now and then we'd get lucky and make it inside. Sometimes only one of us would get in. They'd stay for a little while, then come back out and tell the rest of us about the wonders they'd seen inside, as though they'd just returned from another world.

Because we were drinking in the Datsun, we'd usually take the country back roads into Hamilton. Those roads became part of the adventure themselves, with hills, dips and corners and a group of fifteen-year-olds who thought they were bulletproof. That Datsun got airborne on more than one occasion.

Looking back now, it's frightening to think about just how dangerous some of the things we were doing actually were. We could have killed ourselves or someone else. At fifteen, though, consequences weren't something we gave much thought to. We were young, reckless and discovering a world that, for me especially, had been completely off limits.

There was something else I discovered during that time too: music. Real music. As kids, Mum had made all of us learn an instrument. Mine was the piano, and what I played were hymns. I hated it. My piano teacher kept a ruler close by, and if I played a wrong note, I'd get a rap across the knuckles with it. Needless to say, piano lessons weren't exactly something I looked forward to.

What I'd always wanted to learn was the guitar, but that wasn't an option. In the world I grew up in, the guitar represented rock music, and rock music was certainly not

something we were supposed to be listening to, let alone playing.

Now, with this newfound freedom, an entirely new world opened up to me. I discovered Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Pantera, Led Zeppelin and so many others. After growing up so sheltered from popular culture, hearing this music for the first time was incredible, and I couldn't get enough of it.

There was something about the rawness of it, particularly the grunge music of the time, that grabbed me. Maybe it was because it sounded nothing like the world I'd come from. It was loud, rebellious and completely forbidden by everything I had been taught growing up, and I loved it. To this day, '90s grunge remains my jam.

Around this time, I'd also just got my driver's licence. I didn't exactly have the money to walk into a car yard, so I did what you did in the country and swapped an old chainsaw I had for a Hillman Hunter. It wasn't much, but it was mine.

Having the Hillman made getting back out to Mum's farm much more manageable and certainly much safer than what I'd been doing before. Until then, I'd sometimes ride my farm bike illegally along the back roads to get there.

Mum knew I rode the bike on the back roads, but motorcycles were another source of contention between us. She had made it very clear that once I got my car licence, I was forbidden from getting a motorcycle licence. By then, I was living away from home, receiving the Independent Youth Benefit, going to school and beginning to make my own decisions. Being told what I could and couldn't do still didn't sit particularly well with me, and the motorcycle licence became just one more thing we clashed over.

For the first time in my life, I had friends, music, girls, a car and a level of freedom I had never known. I was going to school, going out, drinking and laughing, and I was having the time of my life.

But there were really two lives happening at once. While my new life was opening up, Mum's world seemed to be getting smaller.

Her health continued to deteriorate. Despite the disagreements between us, when she needed help, I went home. I'd drive the Hillman back out to the farm and slip straight back into the responsibilities I'd grown up with. With Mum getting weaker, I took care of many of the physical jobs around the place. I'd stock the firewood, help wash the clothes, boil water over the fire for the bathtub, weed the garden and do whatever else needed doing for Mum and my siblings.

Mum's strength was disappearing. She was constantly short of breath, and her legs had begun to swell. The more she struggled, the more school I missed.

That was incredibly frustrating because I genuinely wanted an education. I was already trying to catch up academically, but every time I started making progress, I'd

need more time away. I wasn't skipping school because I didn't care about it. I simply couldn't get ahead, let alone catch up, while also trying to help at home.

There was one strange advantage to being fifteen and having the level of independence I had: I could write my own notes excusing myself from class. There wasn't a parent managing my schooling or explaining my absences. I was effectively responsible for myself, so when I needed time away to go back to the farm, I'd write the note myself and hand it in.

Looking back, there was something almost ridiculous about a fifteen-year-old officially excusing his own absence from school, but that was my life. In some ways, I was discovering how to be a teenager for the very first time. In others, I was already carrying responsibilities that belonged to an adult.

Then I'd return to Matamata and become fifteen again, surrounded by friends, school, girls, music, alcohol and freedom. I was caught between two completely different worlds: one I couldn't wait to discover, and another I still felt responsible for.

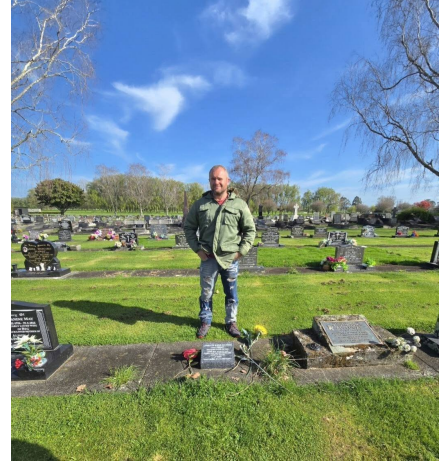
I didn't know it then, but the freedom I'd only just discovered wasn't going to last.

CHAPTER 04

MY EVERYTHING

Over the following months, Mum's health continued to deteriorate. Eventually, she went to see a doctor, which in itself was a big step for her. Mum had always been against what she called "Western medicine", so seeking medical help was not something that came naturally to her.

The diagnosis was devastating. Mum had lung cancer, and by the time it was discovered, it had already spread throughout much of her body. I don't think I fully understood what those words meant at fifteen. I knew cancer was serious, of course, but understanding that your mother is sick and accepting that she might actually die are two very different things. Somewhere in my mind, I still believed there would be a treatment, a miracle, or something that would turn everything around.



As her condition worsened, it became clear that Mum needed far more care than any of us could provide at home. Eventually, she needed hospice care. Even then, we held onto hope, or at least the hope we had been given. The church convinced Mum, and us kids, that natural remedies could heal her. Things like apricot kernels, royal jelly and other natural treatments were put forward as the answer.

Prayer had always been a huge part of our lives, but now it became even more important. We prayed for Mum to be healed. We prayed for the cancer to leave her body, and we prayed for a miracle. The belief was that the more we prayed, the more we would be heard, so we prayed harder. When Mum didn't get better, we didn't stop. We prayed more because we believed that somewhere, somehow, God was listening and that if our faith was strong enough, He could still save her.

Sadly, we believed it because we desperately wanted to believe that Mum was going to get better. When someone you love is dying, hope can be incredibly powerful. You grab onto anything that tells you there might still be a chance.

My younger siblings were placed into the care of people within the church. In time, that would prove to be even more damaging for them. There is much more I could say about what happened after they were placed in that environment, but those experiences belong to them, not me. This is my story to tell, and theirs is theirs.

There had also been discussions among the church elders about what was going to happen to me. These were some of the same people who had previously told my mother that I was "from the devil", so I had very little trust in whatever plans were being made for my future.

By that stage, I had already spent much of my young life having decisions made for me. Where I lived, what I was taught, what I was allowed to believe and what sort of future I was supposed to have had largely been decided by other people. This time, I refused. Whatever the church elders were planning for me, I wanted no part of it, and I made the decision that from that point forward, I would pretty much go it alone.

Looking back, that's an enormous decision for a fifteen-year-old to make. At the time, though, it didn't feel brave or dramatic. It simply felt like the only option I was prepared to accept.

So, while my younger siblings went into the care of people within the church, I moved yet again. This time, I went back to Mum's rented farmhouse, where I lived alone and safeguarded what few possessions she owned until she was well enough to return home. At least, that was what I believed would happen.

I didn't see myself as packing away the belongings of someone who was dying. In my fifteen-year-old mind, I was looking after Mum's home for her. Her things were still there, and her life was still there. I was simply keeping everything safe until she was strong enough to walk back through the door, but that day never came.

Looking back now, it seems almost impossible that I was only fifteen. I was living alone, trying to continue with my own life while watching my mother's life slowly disappear. There was no instruction manual for any of it. I was still a kid trying to deal with something that would have been overwhelming for most adults.

I would travel from the farmhouse near Matamata, across the Kaimai Range to Tauranga, to visit her. I usually managed to make the trip about once a week, depending on whether I could afford the fuel. Every time I saw Mum, there seemed to be a little less of her. She was getting thinner and weaker with every visit. The woman who had raised me, who had always been such a huge presence in my life, was slowly disappearing in front of me, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it.

I remember one visit in particular when Mum hugged me and apologised for giving me what she described as a "shit life". Those words have stayed with me. Whatever had happened between us, whatever mistakes had been made and whatever difficulties we had lived through, she was still my mum. At fifteen, I wasn't standing there analysing my childhood or thinking about blame. I was watching the person who had been at the centre of my entire world slipping away.

She then asked me to make her a promise. She wanted me to promise that I would honour God. I made that promise to my dying mother, but it is a promise I have struggled with throughout my life.

Faith had shaped almost every part of my childhood. God had been presented to me as all-loving, all-seeing and all-powerful. Yet here was my mother, a woman who had devoted her life and soul to Him, dying painfully from cancer. I couldn't reconcile those two things.

I couldn't understand why a God capable of answering prayers wouldn't answer hers. We had prayed, we had prayed harder, and we had believed that if we kept praying, eventually we would be heard, but Mum kept getting sicker. I couldn't understand why someone who believed so completely could suffer so much. Those were enormous questions for a fifteen-year-old boy, and I didn't have the answers then. I'm not sure I've ever really found them.

One day, I received another phone call telling me that Mum wasn't doing well. I had received calls like that many times during the previous months, so although I was worried, I had no way of knowing that this time would be different.

I checked the fuel gauge in my car, and it was on empty. Payday was still three days away, and Tauranga was about 75 kilometres away, on the other side of the Kaimai Range. I looked at that gauge and tried to make what seemed like the sensible decision. I didn't believe there was any chance the car would make it there, so I decided not to go.

It was a simple decision made by a fifteen-year-old kid who had no money and an almost empty fuel tank. I had no idea how much that decision would follow me.

Then came another phone call telling me that my mother had died.

Everything changed in that moment. Suddenly, the amount of fuel in the tank didn't matter. Whether the car made it didn't matter, and whether I ended up stranded halfway across the Kaimais didn't matter. I jumped into the car and drove.

Tears streamed down my face as I headed across the Kaimai Range. I knew where I was going, but I also knew what was waiting for me when I got there. When I reached the top of the range, the sun was setting, and I can still picture that sky today. Against the colours of the sunset, the clouds formed what looked to me like an eagle. I don't know whether there was any meaning behind it. Maybe it was simply a grieving fifteen-year-old trying to make sense of something that didn't make sense, but I saw an eagle, and for whatever reason, that image has never left me.

I kept driving, and somehow, despite the fuel gauge telling me that I wouldn't make it, the car carried me all the way to Tauranga.

When I arrived, Mum was still lying in the bed. I remember looking at her face and, for the first time in well over a year, she looked peaceful. The pain was gone. The struggle to breathe was gone. The sickness and exhaustion that had slowly taken over her body were finally gone. She was my mum again, but she wasn't there anymore.

Mum died on 13 September 1995, exactly one year to the day after receiving her cancer diagnosis. She was only 47 years old.

As I write this, I am now 47 myself, the same age my mother was when she died. There is something confronting about reaching the age your parent never lived beyond. At

fifteen, 47 seemed a lifetime away. Now that I am here, I realise just how young she really was and how much life she should still have had ahead of her.

There is something about that day that I have carried with me ever since: the car made it. That is the part I have replayed in my head more times than I could ever count.

When I received that first phone call, I looked at the fuel gauge and decided that I couldn't risk the drive. A few hours later, after being told Mum had died, I got into that exact same car, with that exact same amount of fuel, and took the gamble anyway. Somehow, I made it all the way to Tauranga.

For years, I have wondered what would have happened if I had just got into the car the first time. Maybe I would have made it, and maybe I wouldn't have. I will never know. What I do know is that I missed those final hours with the woman who bore me, raised me and, despite everything we had been through, was still my mum.

There are things in life you can go back and fix. There are apologies you can make, relationships you can repair and mistakes you can try to put right. This wasn't one of them. There would be no next visit, no next phone call, no chance to tell her one more thing or ask her one more question, and no opportunity to sit beside her one last time. For most of my life, I have had to live with that.

Today, as an adult, I can look back and see a fifteen-year-old boy with almost no money trying to make a decision based on an empty fuel gauge. I understand that boy better now than I did for many years, but understanding something doesn't necessarily make the pain disappear.

Mum was complicated, and our life together had been complicated. There had been religion, isolation, arguments and things I couldn't understand as a child, but love doesn't disappear just because life is complicated. She was still Mum, and now she was gone.



I was fifteen years old, living in a world I was only just beginning to understand. My younger siblings had been placed in the care of others, I had chosen to go my own way, and the person who had been at the centre of my life was gone.

I had just lost my everything.

CHAPTER 05

ON MY OWN

The evening Mum died, I stayed with my younger siblings. We had all just lost our mother, and for that night at least, we were together. There were seven of us kids altogether, although by then our lives were already beginning to head in very different directions.

Afterwards, I drove back across the Kaimai Range and returned to the farmhouse near Matamata alone.

I had already been living there by myself while Mum was sick, but walking back into that house after she died felt completely different. It was dark, empty and somehow quieter than it had ever been before.

Until that night, there had always been a part of me that believed Mum would eventually come home. Now I knew she never would.

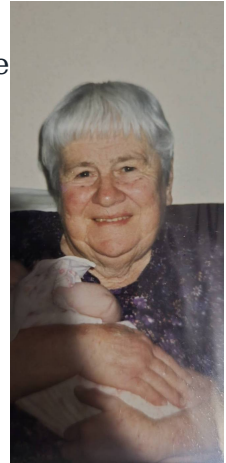
Everything was still exactly as she had left it. Her clothes and belongings were still there, and I couldn't bring myself to go into her bedroom. I left her room untouched. I didn't sit there crying or allow myself to fall apart. In truth, I didn't really feel much of anything. I was numb, and I tried as hard as I could not to think about what had happened.

I was fifteen years old and alone in an empty farmhouse after losing my mother. Looking back now, I realise how extraordinary that situation was, but at the time I simply did what I had already learned to do. I carried on.

Mum's funeral was held at the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tauranga. There was a decent turnout, although even at fifteen I noticed that many of the people who attended had been noticeably absent while Mum was sick. I remember looking around and thinking they were hypocrites. Perhaps that was harsh coming from a fifteen-year-old, but I couldn't understand why so many people could suddenly find the time to be there after she had died when they hadn't found the time while she was alive and desperately ill.

All seven of Mum's children attended the funeral. My father was there as well, although under circumstances that probably say something about how unusual our family life had become. Dad was in jail at the time and had been given clearance to attend Mum's funeral.

I stood beside him at the burial. Dad was never someone who showed much emotion, and that day was no different. I don't remember some great emotional exchange between us or words that changed anything. We simply stood there together as Mum was buried.



My aunty and grandmother had arranged much of the funeral, including decisions about the coffin. Mum was buried in a plain plywood coffin. It was simple, inexpensive and without anything elaborate about it, which was exactly how Mum would have wanted it.

After the funeral, everyone eventually returned to wherever their lives had taken them, and I went back to the farmhouse.

I remained there alone for the next few months while I finished the school year. During that time, I slowly packed up Mum's belongings and the things my younger siblings had left behind. Most of those possessions eventually went to my siblings. There wasn't one particular object that I remember holding onto or some treasured possession that became symbolic of Mum for me. I simply packed things away and did what needed to be done.

The farmhouse itself was pretty run down, and we would be the last people ever to live there. After I eventually left, it was demolished. The building disappeared, but strangely, a couple of pieces of that part of my childhood survived.

Two large weeping willow trees that marked opposite corners of the property are still there today. One of those trees held the tyre swing we played on as kids. Even now, if you know where to look and look hard enough, you can still see the old rope that held that swing hanging from one of the branches.

There is something about that which stays with me. The farmhouse is gone, Mum is gone, and all seven of her children grew up and went in different directions, but those trees are still standing. Somewhere among the branches, an old piece of rope remains from a childhood that sometimes feels like it belonged to someone else.

Despite everything that had happened, I finished the remainder of the school year. I had missed plenty of school while Mum was sick, and education had never exactly been a strong foundation in my childhood. Between homeschooling, isolation and the upheaval of the previous years, there were enormous gaps in what I had been taught.

Somehow, I discovered that I had passed a couple of my Fifth Form School Certificate subjects. I was genuinely surprised. It probably wouldn't have seemed like an extraordinary academic achievement to most people, but to me it meant something. After everything that had happened, I had managed to pass something.

I had also applied to study automotive engineering at polytechnic in Tauranga and was accepted into the pre-trade course. For the first time in a while, there appeared to be some sort of direction ahead of me.

Once the school year finished and everything at the farmhouse had been dealt with, I left Matamata and moved to Tauranga to live with my much-loved grandma.

Grandma was a funny old lady with a great, and often fairly crude, sense of humour. She had a chuckle and a grin that I will never forget. Whenever she really laughed, her eyes would squint up, and just thinking about it now can still bring a smile to my face.

She was also incredibly methodical and particular about everything she did. Today, I would probably describe some of her behaviour as obsessive, but to me it was simply Grandma being Grandma. Every time we left the house, the front door would be locked and unlocked several times so she could make absolutely certain it was locked. There was no point trying to rush the process. We weren't leaving until Grandma was satisfied that door was secure.

Her arthritis was severe, particularly in her knees, and walking was difficult and painful. Before we went anywhere, I would sweep the path outside the house to make sure there were no loose stones or pebbles. Even a small stone under her foot could jar her knees and cause her considerable pain.

There are sounds from childhood that somehow stay stored in your memory, and Grandma walking down the hallway is one of mine. I can still hear the thud of her walking stick followed by the shuffle of her feet as she slowly made her way along the hall. She talked to herself constantly and would stop at different photographs hanging along the hallway to say hello to the people in them before continuing on her way.

Grandma wasn't particularly affectionate, at least not in the traditional sense. We weren't constantly hugging each other or talking about how much we loved one another, but I never doubted that she loved me. I also knew, perhaps with a little bit of pride, that I was her favourite grandchild.

In many ways, Grandma and I looked after each other. She gave me somewhere to live and somewhere I belonged at a time when I desperately needed both. In return, I helped with the chores and the physical things her arthritis made difficult. More importantly, we gave each other company.

She didn't drive, so she absolutely loved our outings together. Getting her out of the house could be a mission because of how difficult walking had become, but once we were in the car, she loved going for drives. Sometimes we would head out towards the Kaimais, and other times we would go out for dinner at Cobb & Co. They weren't extravagant adventures, but they meant a lot to her, and looking back now, they mean a lot to me too.

Strangely, despite both of us grieving the same woman, Grandma and I didn't really talk about Mum. We didn't sit together discussing our emotions or trying to make sense of what had happened. That simply wasn't how either of us dealt with things.

There was one exception that has stayed with me. Grandma once told me that the song Kiss from a Rose by Seal reminded her of Mum. She didn't need to explain why. That was probably about as close as we came to sitting down and talking openly about the grief we were both carrying.

After losing Mum and leaving my friends behind in Matamata, Grandma became the most important person in my life. We were two people from completely different generations, both dealing with our own difficulties, and somehow we fitted together.

Contact with my younger siblings became less frequent. They had been placed into care around 130 kilometres away from Tauranga, which made seeing them difficult. After growing up together, distance and circumstances were now separating us. Their lives were taking one path while mine was heading down another.

Through all of this, I was still receiving the Independent Youth Benefit. Starting the automotive engineering pre-trade course felt like an opportunity to build something resembling a future for myself. I wanted to succeed, and when it came to the practical side of automotive work, I enjoyed it. I had always been good with my hands and mechanically minded. If something needed to be pulled apart, fixed or figured out physically, I could usually make sense of it.

The academic side was another story.

Maths and some of the classroom subjects were incredibly difficult for me. I was suddenly expected to learn alongside people who had spent their entire lives receiving a conventional education, while I was carrying enormous gaps from mine. I could understand the mechanical work in front of me, but putting calculations and theory around it was much harder.

Instead of telling somebody that I was struggling, I became embarrassed. I didn't want people discovering how much I didn't know, so there were days when I simply wouldn't turn up. Asking for help would probably have been the sensible thing to do, but at that age I saw admitting that I couldn't understand something as exposing a weakness.

Looking back, I can also recognise that I was struggling with what I would now describe as depression. At the time, I didn't have those words for it. No one had offered me grief counselling after Mum died, and nobody sat me down and explained what losing your mother at fifteen could do to you emotionally. I had never even heard of grief counselling and wouldn't have known where to begin looking for help.

So I dealt with Mum's death the only way I knew how. I tried not to think about it.

I wasn't processing what had happened. I was burying it and getting on with life. At the time, I thought those were the same thing.

For a while, living with Grandma gave me some stability. I had somewhere to come home to, someone who needed me and someone whose company I genuinely enjoyed. After years of upheaval, there was something comforting about the predictability of life with her. I knew there would be the thud of that walking stick coming down the hallway, the shuffle of her feet, conversations with photographs on the wall, the front door being checked several times before we could leave, and another path to sweep

before one of our drives.

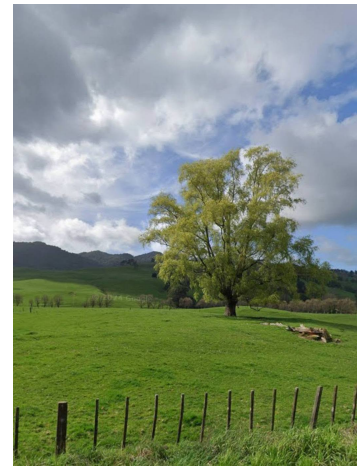
Those ordinary things became important to me.

Eventually, though, it was time for me to move on again. My attempt at the pre-trade course hadn't worked out the way I had hoped, and I needed to figure out what came next.

I left Tauranga and moved south to Lower Hutt. There, I found myself living in a little room at the back of my older brother's garage and working as a service station attendant.

Once again, I had left behind someone I loved, moved somewhere new and started another life.

By then, I was becoming pretty good at starting over.



CHAPTER 06

NO BRAKES

The next few years of my life were fairly unsettled. I moved around New Zealand, worked a string of different jobs and generally made life up as I went along. Most of my work was in service stations, either behind the counter as a cashier or outside as a forecourt attendant. Back then, that meant actually serving customers at their cars, filling tanks, checking oil and water, cleaning windscreens and doing whatever else needed doing.



Around six months after Mum died, I bought my first road motorcycle, although my obsession with motorcycles had actually started much earlier. I was about eight years old when my grandfather bought me my first motorbike, and from the moment I climbed onto it, I was hooked. There was something about motorcycles that got under my skin and never left. I loved the sound of an engine, the smell of petrol, pulling them apart, fixing them and, most of all, that feeling when you twisted the throttle and took off.

I've owned a motorcycle pretty much ever since. That first road bike opened up a whole new world for me, and motorcycles would go on to become one of the few constants throughout the many different stages of my life. I've owned more than a hundred of them to date. Some people collect stamps; apparently, I collect motorcycles. Judging by the amount of money I've spent on them over the years, stamps probably would have been the smarter option.

By the time I was around twenty, I'd spent time back in Lower Hutt, where I'd lived during parts of my childhood, as well as Napier, where Dad was living at the time. I bounced around a fair bit, usually finding work wherever I landed. Somewhere amongst all that moving around, I started smoking weed, and when I say I started smoking weed, I don't mean the occasional joint at a party. Before long, I was stoned all day, every day.

It became part of my daily routine. I smoked when I woke up, smoked with friends, smoked after work and smoked before bed. Eventually, being stoned stopped feeling like being stoned. It simply became my normal state.

Eventually, I got a job at Autofix in Lower Hutt, working on the forecourt and doing automotive servicing and mechanical work. I loved it. I could finally make some money using the skills I'd learned working on cars. I serviced vehicles, got my hands dirty and spent my days around engines, tools and petrol. I was good with mechanical things, and for once I had work that I genuinely enjoyed.

Outside work, life was becoming one long experiment. Weed was the constant, but I also started trying acid, ecstasy and magic mushrooms. There was no great philosophical reason behind any of it. If something sounded like it might be fun, chances were I was willing to give it a go. At that point, drugs weren't destroying my life. I was working, I had somewhere to live, I had mates and I had motorcycles. As far as I was concerned, everything was going pretty well.

At the time, I was living with a couple of friends in a rented house on High Street in Lower Hutt. It was your fairly typical house full of young blokes, and the standards weren't particularly high. If you could find a clean cup and the toilet still flushed, we were basically running a five-star establishment.

There was one expense, however, that was starting to annoy me. Considering the amount of weed I was smoking, I was spending a fair bit of money on it, so I came up with what I thought was an excellent solution: I'd grow my own.

There was some unused space in the ceiling, and before long I'd turned part of it into my own little horticultural project. Only a few friends knew it was there, and I intended to keep it that way. As far as I was concerned, it made perfect financial sense. Why keep buying weed when I could grow it myself? In my permanently stoned twenty-year-old mind, I was practically an entrepreneur.

One of the friends who knew about my little horticultural venture was Craig. One day, Craig turned up with some interesting information. Apparently, somewhere in the hills around Lower Hutt, there was a patch of cannabis growing, and he suggested we go for a bush walk and see if we could find it.

We didn't know exactly where it was, we didn't know who owned it, and we certainly hadn't given much thought to what might happen if the owner happened to be there when we found it. None of those details seemed particularly important at the time. Going on an adventure through the bush looking for a mysterious crop of weed sounded like a perfectly reasonable way to spend the day.

We drove out to the general area, parked the car and headed into the bush. For the first twenty minutes or so, we wandered around with very little idea what we were doing. We didn't have a map, coordinates or any real directions. We were basically two stoners walking through the New Zealand bush hoping we'd somehow stumble across a cannabis plantation.

Then I smelled something familiar.

I stopped, and Craig noticed it too. We knew that smell, so we started following our noses through the bush. The further we walked, the stronger it became, until eventually we found what we'd been looking for.

There it was: the holy grail.

Hidden amongst the bush were big, healthy cannabis plants absolutely loaded with bud. For two young blokes who smoked weed from morning until night, it was a magnificent sight. For a moment, we simply stood there admiring what we'd found.

There was, of course, one fairly significant problem. None of it belonged to us.

That probably should have been the point where we turned around, walked back to the car and congratulated ourselves on successfully finding it. Instead, common sense completely left the building, and we started pulling plants and stuffing as much as we could into our bags.

We had no idea who owned the crop, and at that particular moment we didn't really care. We were probably too busy congratulating ourselves on our incredible good fortune to consider why somebody had gone to so much trouble to hide a large cannabis crop in the middle of the bush.

Then a voice came roaring through the trees.

"I'm going to fu#king kxll you!"

Everything stopped.

We turned around and saw a patched Mongrel Mob member charging towards us through the bush. I think I literally sh@t myself. There are moments in life when you instantly realise you've made a poor decision, and this was definitely one of them.

Whatever bravery Craig and I had possessed a few seconds earlier disappeared immediately. We knew enough to understand that being caught stealing someone's cannabis crop was probably not going to end with a polite request to put the plants back.

We grabbed our bags and ran for our lives.

There was no convenient pathway back to the car, so we simply smashed our way through whatever was in front of us. Branches, scrub, mud and wild gorse bushes became part of the escape route. The gorse ripped into my arms and legs like thousands of needles as I stumbled, fell over, got back up and kept running, all while desperately trying to hold onto a bag full of stolen weed.

In hindsight, dropping the bloody bag might have been the sensible thing to do. Apparently, however, there are limits to common sense, even when you're being chased through the bush by a very angry gang member.

I could still hear yelling somewhere behind us, which was all the encouragement I needed to keep moving. Every time I stumbled, I expected to feel someone grab the back of my shirt. My heart was pounding, my arms and legs were being shredded by the gorse, and suddenly our brilliant afternoon adventure didn't seem quite so brilliant anymore.

Then, through the scrub in the distance, I saw something beautiful: the roof of my car.

I've never been particularly athletic, but I reckon I could have qualified for the Olympics that day. Craig and I tore through the last of the bush, reached the car, threw ourselves inside and took off as quickly as we could.

As we sped away, I looked into the rear-view mirror and saw one seriously peed-off Mongrel Mob member standing behind us, shaking his fists and screaming threats in our direction. My heart was still hammering, but we'd made it.

Somehow, Craig and I had gone into the hills looking for a rumoured crop of weed, actually found it, stolen as much as we could carry, been chased through the bush by a patched gang member and escaped with both the weed and all our limbs still attached. At around twenty years old, that probably qualified as a successful afternoon.

We thought we'd gotten away with it, but we hadn't.

There was a price to pay for i had done, and it was coming my way.

CHAPTER 07

THROW IT BACK!

With bags full of stolen weed and the satisfaction of somehow managing to outrun the Mongrel Mob, I returned home while Craig headed back to his place. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. We had taken a ridiculous risk, but somehow we had managed to get away with it.

Or at least, that was what I thought.

When I emptied out my share of our newly acquired bounty, I noticed tiny orange spots scattered across the cannabis. I assumed it was some kind of fungus or mould, but apparently my standards weren't particularly high back then. I'd just risked getting caught stealing the stuff from the Mongrel Mob, so a few mysterious orange spots weren't going to stop me from smoking it.

My more immediate concern was that the cannabis was still wet. Waiting patiently for it to dry naturally didn't even enter my mind. I wanted to smoke it, and I wanted to smoke it now, so the oven seemed like the perfect solution.

I have absolutely no idea what temperature I used or how long I left it in there, but eventually it was dry enough for my purposes. It probably tasted bloody terrible, but free weed was free weed, and that night I smoked as much of it as I could. Craig did exactly the same with his share.

Within a couple of days, the phone rang. It was Craig, and he sounded serious.

"We need to throw it back!"

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I asked him what exactly we were supposed to throw back.

"The weed. We need to throw it back."

I was even more confused and asked him where the hell he expected us to throw it.

As luck would have it, a Mongrel Mob member lived next door to Craig. He told me that he'd been looking out his window while his neighbour was outside attending to his dog. At some point, the neighbour had apparently looked towards Craig and made some sort of gesture.

According to Craig, this wasn't just an ordinary gesture. He believed it was a very specific message telling him that we needed to return the stolen cannabis by throwing



it into the man's dog kennel.

I sat there trying to make sense of what he was telling me. I asked Craig whether the man had actually told him to put the cannabis in the kennel. Craig said he hadn't. I then asked whether the man had actually said anything to him at all.

Again, the answer was no.

When I asked how the hell he knew that was what the man wanted, Craig simply told me that he'd been given a signal.

Craig was completely convinced, but I certainly wasn't. Whatever secret Mongrel Mob dog-kennel communication system Craig believed he'd just witnessed, I wanted no part of it. I told him he was crazy and that there was absolutely no way I was throwing my share into his neighbour's dog kennel.

As far as I was concerned, that was the end of the conversation.

A day or so later, Craig called again. This time there was no talk about dog kennels. He was convinced that people were following him and believed they were Mongrel Mob members dressed in plain clothes who were coming after him because of what we'd done.

Then he told me he'd stolen a car to get away from them.

I remember hanging up the phone wondering what the hell was going on. Things had gone from strange to completely bloody ridiculous in the space of only a couple of days.

Then came another phone call. This time Craig was on the highway and in a full-blown panic. He believed he was being chased and was speeding along the road, weaving through traffic and desperately trying to get away from whoever he thought was following him.

I tried talking to him, but there was no convincing him otherwise. Whoever he believed was chasing him was absolutely real in his mind. His solution was to ditch the car he was driving, steal another one and switch vehicles so his pursuers wouldn't know what he was driving.

That was when I realised this was no longer simply Craig being weird or paranoid. Something was seriously wrong.

At that stage of my life, I had no understanding of drug-induced psychosis. I didn't even know what the term meant. I had no idea how drugs, paranoia and possibly a lack of sleep could distort someone's perception of reality to the point where things that weren't happening could become completely real to them.

All I knew was that the Craig I was speaking to wasn't behaving like the Craig I knew. The strangest and most frightening part was the absolute certainty in his voice. He wasn't asking me whether I thought someone might be following him. He knew they were, and as far as he was concerned, he was running from a very real threat.

A day or two later, Craig arrived at my place in a stolen car. I was far from impressed. Whatever chaos Craig had created for himself, I didn't want him bringing it to my front door. I had enough of my own illegal activities going on without a stolen vehicle sitting outside attracting unwanted attention.

More importantly, directly above our heads was my pride and joy: my secret cannabis grow.

I'd put a lot of work into that little operation. Hidden away in the ceiling, under lights and safely out of sight, my plants had been flourishing. Craig knew all about them, and in the state he was in, he suddenly told me that he was going to tell the police.

My heart sank.

Then he added that he was going to tell the Mongrel Mob as well.

That was enough to get me moving.

Suddenly, the ceiling didn't feel like such a clever hiding place anymore. I climbed up and started ripping everything apart. There was no careful harvesting, gentle trimming or time to admire my gardening skills. Plants I'd spent months nurturing were being pulled down as quickly as I could move.

I was devastated. They were beautiful plants, and I'd been bloody proud of them. My little hidden horticultural empire was being destroyed in front of me because I had no idea whether Craig was actually going to follow through with his threats.

Before long, I had a pile of cannabis and another fairly significant problem. I needed to get rid of it.

Leaving it at the house wasn't an option. I didn't know whether Craig would actually go to the police, whether he'd tell the Mongrel Mob, whether he'd forget the entire conversation five minutes later, or whether his increasingly paranoid mind would come up with another plan altogether. I wasn't prepared to hang around and find out.

I stuffed everything I could into the boot of my car and decided it would probably be a good idea to get myself out of the area for a while as well.

Dad immediately came to mind.

Dad had spent much of his life around drugs and crime, so turning up at his place with a boot full of cannabis wasn't exactly going to result in a shocked expression followed by a lecture about making better life choices. If anyone knew what to do with it, I

figured Dad would.

I pointed the car towards Napier and drove. Every kilometre I put behind me made me feel a little more comfortable. Eventually, I reached Dad and managed to offload what I had.

For me, the immediate problem was solved, but for Craig, things were only getting worse.

By then, the police had caught up with him. The stolen cars had accumulated, along with a considerable list of charges, and he was eventually arrested. He was heading to jail.

Then I heard something that, even by Craig's recent standards, was extraordinary. According to news reports at the time, while being transported in police custody, he somehow managed to kick out a window and escape.

His freedom didn't last particularly long. After everything that had happened, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when I heard where police eventually found him.

He had gone home.

Craig was arrested again, and that was the last time I ever saw him.

There was no goodbye and no final conversation. Our friendship simply ended there.

For years afterwards, whenever I thought about Craig, I remembered the craziness of those final days. At the time, I didn't have the maturity or knowledge to understand what had happened to him. I simply thought he'd lost the plot.

Looking back now, I see it very differently. I had watched someone's mind turn against them. The imaginary signals, the people following him and the desperate attempts to escape something that may never have existed outside his own mind were completely real to Craig. He was genuinely frightened and reacting to a world that, for him, had become terrifyingly real.

It should have been a warning to me, but at that age, warnings only work if you're willing to recognise them.

I wasn't.

I carried on with my life, still convinced that I knew exactly what I was doing.

As it turned out, I didn't have a bloody clue.

TO BE CONTINUED.....

CHAPTER 08

HIGH VOLTAGE

By the time I turned twenty-one, life seemed to be heading in a reasonably good direction. My job at Autofix was going well, I was earning my own money, paying my own bills and enjoying the independence that came with having a regular income.

I had celebrated my twenty-first birthday with a small, low-key gathering at home. There was no huge party or extravagant celebration, just some family members and the few friends I had at the time. It wasn't anything spectacular, but I was happy enough with where life seemed to be taking me.

Autofix had given me some structure. I would turn up for work, serve customers, work on cars and collect my pay. After the uncertainty of the previous few years, there was something satisfying about having a routine and being able to support myself.

I'd also managed to buy myself a Subaru Legacy Turbo. I loved that car. It wasn't just about owning a turbo Subaru, although at twenty-one that was certainly a big part of it. The car represented something to me. I'd bought it myself, I was paying it off myself, and every time I got behind the wheel I felt proud of what I'd managed to achieve. For someone who had spent much of his teenage years simply trying to work out where he belonged, I finally felt as though I was beginning to build a life of my own.

Then one ordinary day at work changed the direction of everything.

A customer had brought in a Holden Commodore with a 3.8-litre engine that wasn't running properly. It had a misfire, and I was trying to diagnose which cylinder was causing the problem. With the engine running, I started checking the ignition system and pulled one of the spark plug leads.

The electrical shock that hit me was enormous.

An automotive ignition system can produce tens of thousands of volts, and whatever came through that lead gave me one hell of a belt. The closest comparison I can make is touching an electric fence, except this felt considerably stronger.

It certainly woke me up.

At first, I didn't think much more about it. Working on cars came with the occasional cut, burn, smashed knuckle and other unpleasant surprise, so getting a decent electrical shock wasn't something I immediately considered life-changing.



I carried on with my day.

As the hours passed, however, I started feeling strange. I didn't feel seriously ill, and there wasn't one particular symptom I could point to. I simply knew that I didn't feel right.

That evening, when I lay down, something happened that I had never experienced before.

My body suddenly jolted.

About five seconds later, it happened again.

Then again.

And again.

It felt similar to that strange falling sensation people sometimes experience just as they're drifting off to sleep, when the body suddenly jumps and wakes them up. The difference was that I wasn't drifting off to sleep. I was completely awake, and these weren't small twitches that could easily be ignored.

The jolts were violent, painful and very obvious. Roughly every five seconds, my body would suddenly jerk hard enough that there was absolutely no hiding what was happening. Anyone looking at me could see it. My muscles would violently contract without warning, and before I had even recovered from one jolt, I knew another one was only seconds away.

The jolting continued whether I was lying down, sitting or standing. I couldn't predict it, control it or make it stop. Changing position made no difference. Trying to relax made no difference. My body seemed to have developed a mind of its own, firing off these violent movements every few seconds regardless of what I wanted it to do.

I had absolutely no control over my own body.

It was frightening, particularly because I had no idea what was happening to me. Only hours earlier I'd been at work doing the same job I'd done countless times before. Now, roughly every five seconds, my body was violently jerking in a way that was painful, exhausting and impossible for anyone around me not to notice.

I eventually went to see a doctor and underwent a series of tests and scans while they tried to determine what was happening. I was told that the involuntary movements were a symptom known as myoclonus, which causes sudden, uncontrollable muscle jerks.

What was never completely clear was why it had started.

The timing made the electrical shock impossible for me to ignore, but whether it had actually caused the problem, triggered something that was already there, or was

simply an extraordinary coincidence was never definitively established.

Knowing what the condition was called didn't make living with it any easier.

Myoclonus is the medical term for sudden, brief and involuntary muscle jerks. Most people have probably experienced a harmless form of it without even knowing the name. That sudden jolt you sometimes get just as you're falling asleep is a type of myoclonus. In my case, however, it wasn't happening once as I drifted off to sleep. It was happening repeatedly, roughly every five seconds, while I was completely awake.

The movements weren't something I could anticipate or control. There was no warning before they happened and no way of simply telling my body to stop. A muscle, a limb or sometimes much of my body would suddenly jerk violently, and seconds later it would happen again. Imagine someone randomly flicking a switch connected to your muscles, except you have no control over the switch and no way of turning it off.

Myoclonus itself isn't necessarily a disease. It's a symptom that can occur for many different reasons, including problems involving the brain or nervous system, reactions to medications, metabolic problems and a range of neurological conditions. Sometimes even after testing, the exact cause isn't obvious.

That was the frustrating part for me. The doctors could give what was happening to my body a name, but giving it a name didn't give me an explanation for why it had suddenly begun.

The doctor prescribed diazepam in an attempt to control the jerking. It reduced the intensity, but it didn't make the problem disappear. Instead, it created a different problem.

The medication completely flattened me.

I could barely function properly. I felt heavily sedated, disconnected from everything around me and incapable of doing much of anything. I was no longer jerking with the same intensity, but I was walking around like a dribbling mess.

That didn't feel like much of an improvement.

I had a choice between experiencing the constant involuntary movements or taking medication that left me so sedated that I could barely function. Neither option was particularly appealing, but eventually I decided that I would rather deal with the jerking and at least have some ability to live my life.

Unfortunately, there was another consequence that I couldn't simply choose to ignore.

I couldn't work.

Working around moving vehicles, machinery, tools and electrical equipment while my body could suddenly jerk without warning wasn't safe or practical. The job at Autofix

that had given me independence and stability was gone.

For the first time, I began to understand how quickly someone's circumstances could change through something they had never planned for. One week you're working, earning money and paying your bills. Then something happens that you never saw coming, and suddenly the numbers no longer add up.

My rent still needed to be paid. The electricity company didn't particularly care that I'd developed a medical problem. Neither did the people expecting repayments on my car. I had bills, debts and everyday living expenses, but the wage that had previously covered them had disappeared.

The government assistance I received barely touched the sides.

At first, I tried to manage. I looked at everything I owned and started working out what I could live without. The motorbike was one of the first things to go, which hurt. Motorcycles had been part of my life since my grandfather bought me my first bike when I was eight years old, and selling one wasn't something I ever particularly enjoyed doing.

But sentiment didn't pay rent.

Other possessions followed. Every sale gave me a little breathing room. I could cover another bill, make another payment or buy myself another week or two. The problem was that once something was sold, it was gone. There was only so much I owned, and eventually I was going to run out of things that somebody else was willing to buy.

The Subaru was becoming the biggest problem.

Only a short time earlier, I'd been driving it around feeling proud of myself. Now I was looking at the repayments and wondering how much longer I could possibly keep them up.

I had already explored the options available to me and deferred payments for as long as I could. I had stretched things as far as they would go, but eventually there was nothing left to defer. The bills weren't disappearing. They were simply waiting for me further down the road.

I knew what would happen if I stopped paying for the Subaru.

I'd lose the car.

After that, keeping up with the rent would become the next battle.

I wasn't prepared to simply sit there and watch everything I'd worked for disappear. I had already bought myself as much time as I could. I'd sold possessions, deferred payments and tried to stretch every dollar, but I was reaching the end of the road.

The problem had become brutally simple.

I needed money.

I couldn't work, the government payment wasn't enough, there was little left worth selling, and I had exhausted the breathing room I'd managed to negotiate.

Something had to change.

And it had to change quickly.

I needed to think outside the box.

Quick smart.

CHAPTER 09

THE BUS

With my financial future becoming increasingly uncertain, I knew I was going to have to start thinking differently about where I lived. My medical condition wasn't going anywhere, my ability to work was uncertain, and there was no guarantee I would be able to keep paying for a normal place to live.



I had already stretched things as far as I could financially. There wasn't some magical reserve of money sitting there waiting for me, and I couldn't keep pretending everything was going to sort itself out. I needed another option.

Being the person I was, I came up with what seemed like a perfectly reasonable solution at the time. I would buy an old bus and live in it.

It probably wouldn't have appeared particularly reasonable to most people, but to me it made perfect sense. If I owned the bus outright, I wouldn't have rent hanging over my head every week, and I could slowly turn it into somewhere comfortable to live. There were a few fairly obvious details missing from this brilliant plan, but I would worry about those later.

I knew absolutely nothing about buses, but luckily, I knew someone who did. My stepfather, Des.

Des had married Mum a few years before she died and had been a huge part of my teenage years. Although he and Mum lived separately during their marriage, Des lived in Tauranga, where he ran an engineering workshop from a converted cowshed.

That old cowshed was where Des taught me some genuinely useful skills. He taught me how to drive, weld, use machinery, fix engines and make things with my hands. I loved spending time in the workshop with him. There was always something being repaired, fabricated, pulled apart or put back together, and I was usually allowed to get involved.

More importantly, Des allowed me to be a kid. There weren't many adults during my teenage years who managed to do that.

Life around Mum and the religion had often been serious, with rules and restrictions surrounding almost everything. Des was different. Around him, I could laugh, muck around, learn things and make mistakes without feeling as though I had committed some terrible offence.

He had time for me. If I didn't understand something, he showed me again. He taught me without making me feel stupid, and I always knew that if I genuinely needed his

help, I could count on him.

Looking back over my life and the different people who played the role of a father at one time or another, Des was hands down the best dad I ever had.

By this stage, Des was living in a bus himself. He had bought it after Mum died and converted it into a basic but cosy bachelor pad. It wasn't exactly luxury accommodation, but it worked. He had managed to take something originally designed to carry passengers and turn it into a perfectly functional little home.

Seeing what he had done planted the idea firmly in my head. If Des could live in a bus, why couldn't I?

I told him about my plan and asked if he could help me find something suitable. I didn't have much money, so whatever we found needed to be cheap, mechanically sound enough to keep moving, and big enough for me to eventually turn into some sort of home.

As always, Des was happy to help.

We didn't have to look for long. Before the internet became the place where everyone bought and sold everything, there was the Trade & Exchange magazine. You could find just about anything in there if you looked hard enough. Cars, motorbikes, tools, machinery, furniture and, apparently, old buses that nobody quite knew what to do with anymore.

Somewhere amongst its pages, we found an old Bedford bus for sale locally. It ran, which was a promising start, and more importantly, I could afford it.

For the money I had, it was a steal.

We went out to have a look at it. The Bedford was sitting in a paddock where it had clearly been left to rest for quite some time. It was an old school bus and there was absolutely nothing glamorous about it. The paint was faded, it looked tired, and it certainly wasn't going to win any beauty competitions.

But I wasn't looking for beautiful. I was looking for somewhere to live.

Standing there looking at it, I could already picture what I might do with the inside. I could build a bed down one end, put in somewhere to cook, make some cupboards and eventually turn the rest into a small living area. I had enough practical skills to do most of the work myself, and anything I couldn't figure out, Des probably could.

So, I bought it.

Getting it home was the next problem. The bus wasn't registered, it didn't have a roadworthy certificate, and I had a neurological condition that could send sudden, violent jerks through my body without warning. The myoclonus was still causing

painful jolts through my body every few seconds, and they were impossible for anyone around me not to notice.

Any sensible person might have looked at that combination of circumstances and reconsidered the plan. I wasn't particularly good at reconsidering plans.

I drove it home.

It sounds ridiculous looking back, but that was simply how I approached things in those days. There was a problem in front of me, so I dealt with it and worried about the consequences later.

I had also discovered something strange about the myoclonus. When I was concentrating hard on something, particularly driving or keeping myself physically occupied, the jerks seemed to settle down. They didn't disappear completely, but staying busy appeared to make them much less noticeable.

Sitting still was often worse. The more I focused on the jolts and waited for the next one to arrive, the more impossible they became to ignore.

Driving an old Bedford bus certainly gave me something else to concentrate on.

I climbed behind the enormous steering wheel, started it up and prepared to drive my newly purchased home out of the paddock.

It was very different from driving a car. I suddenly had a lot more vehicle behind me than I was used to. Everything felt bigger, heavier and slower. The steering required some commitment, the brakes weren't exactly confidence inspiring, and every strange noise coming from underneath me made me wonder whether something important was about to fall off.

Still, it moved. That was good enough for me.

I eased the old Bedford out of the paddock and onto the road.

There was something strangely exciting about driving it. My life might have been uncertain, my body might have been doing things I couldn't control, and financially I had no idea what the future held, but I now had something tangible I could work with.

Eventually, the old Bedford came rumbling down the road and pulled up outside my place.

Calling it a home at that point was probably being generous. The passenger seats had been removed, leaving behind a large, mostly empty shell. There was no toilet, no shower, no proper kitchen and certainly no comfortable bedroom waiting for me at the back.



It was just an empty old school bus.

But standing inside it, I started mentally dividing the space into rooms. I knew how to weld, build and fabricate things, and I wasn't afraid of getting my hands dirty. After everything Des had taught me over the years, turning an empty bus into somewhere I could live seemed completely achievable.

For the first time since the myoclonus had begun, I also had a proper project to focus on. And projects were something I understood.

At the time, I was actually quite proud of my solution. I didn't see myself as someone whose housing situation was falling apart. In my mind, I had simply adapted to what life had thrown at me.

Looking back now, with everything I know through my own experiences and the work I do today with people experiencing homelessness, I see that moment very differently.

That old Bedford was probably my first real experience of homelessness, other than stays in domestic violence shelters as a child.



I just didn't recognise it as homelessness.

Back then, my idea of homelessness was someone sleeping on a park bench, in a doorway or underneath a bridge. I didn't see myself that way. I owned the bus. I could lock the door, put my belongings inside it and sleep there.

As far as I was concerned, I had simply found an unconventional solution to a financial problem.

It would take me many years to understand that homelessness doesn't always look the way people imagine it does. Sometimes it is obvious. Other times, it is someone living in a vehicle, moving from place to place and trying to remain unseen.

There was just one fairly significant flaw in my brilliant plan. I now owned a large, unregistered old school bus. I still needed somewhere to park it.

A bus isn't exactly something you can quietly slip into a spare corner and hope nobody notices. And finding somewhere I could actually live in this monstrosity was going to prove considerably harder than finding the bus itself.

CHAPTER 10

THE MORGUE

Finding somewhere to park the old Bedford was proving more difficult than I had expected, and time was running out. Buying the bus had been the easy part. Now I needed somewhere I could actually live in it. I needed access to power and water, somewhere reasonably secure, and most importantly, somewhere that wasn't going to cost me more money than I had.



Then I remembered Silverstream. Not far away was an old Christian camp centre situated amongst the buildings of the former Silverstream Hospital. I knew the place existed and knew it had some connection to the Second World War, but at the time I had absolutely no idea just how much history was sitting behind those old walls.

Construction of Silverstream Hospital had begun in September 1941. It was originally intended as a much smaller facility of around 450 beds, designed to serve New Zealand troops stationed at nearby Trentham Military Camp. Following America's entry into the Second World War and the arrival of large numbers of American servicemen in New Zealand, however, the plans changed dramatically. Silverstream was handed over to the United States Navy, and what had originally been planned as a relatively modest New Zealand military hospital rapidly grew into an enormous American medical complex.

Eventually, there were 46 buildings covering around 143,000 square feet, with enough beds for approximately 1,600 patients. From August 1942, the facility became known as United States Navy Mobile Hospital No. 6, later becoming a naval base hospital. Thousands of American servicemen would eventually pass through the place.

Many of the men arriving at Silverstream had come from the war in the Pacific. Some carried wounds from fighting in places such as Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands, while others were suffering from tropical diseases, particularly malaria. At one point in March 1943, around three quarters of the patients at Silverstream were suffering from malaria. During the roughly twenty-one months the Americans operated the hospital, approximately 20,000 patients passed through its wards.

At times, there were so many patients that the ordinary hospital wards weren't enough. Parts of the staff quarters were turned into temporary wards, the gymnasium was used to accommodate patients, and even part of the hospital's theatre block had to be converted into additional ward space. For servicemen who had recently been fighting in the heat, mud and disease of the Pacific, waking up in a hospital bed in a quiet New Zealand valley must have felt like being transported to another world.

The American operation also brought some of the attitudes and policies of the United States military with it. The hospital was racially segregated. Black American personnel were housed separately from white personnel, with historical accounts describing accommodation for Black staff as being situated on the flats below the main hospital complex. Even thousands of kilometres from America, racial segregation followed the servicemen through the gates of Silverstream.

The American nurses lived under unusual conditions as well. Their nurses' home sat higher on the property and was reportedly heavily guarded and surrounded by barbed wire. Around forty American nurses arrived during 1943 to work amongst the hundreds of military personnel caring for the sick and wounded. New Zealanders also worked alongside the Americans, while local Red Cross workers assisted at the hospital and Māori cultural groups visited to entertain recovering servicemen. Some wounded Marines even learned Māori carving as part of their rehabilitation.

By 1944, the American military presence in New Zealand was winding down and Silverstream was handed back. The Wellington Hospital Board went on to use the sprawling complex for geriatric, convalescent, rehabilitation and long-term patients. It remained connected with hospital care for decades, long after the American servicemen and nurses had disappeared from the valley.

By the time I arrived with my old Bedford, those days were over. The soldiers were gone, the nurses were gone and the hospital wards were silent, but many of the buildings remained. Silverstream sat amongst the hills, and the valley had a habit of filling with thick fog. On certain mornings, the mist would settle between the old buildings and hide entire sections of the property. As you walked through it, buildings would slowly emerge from the fog ahead of you. Even during the day, the place could give you the spooks.



Long, dilapidated buildings stretched across different parts of the property. Some still carried the unmistakable appearance of old hospital wards, while others looked as though they had simply been abandoned and forgotten. Higher up on the property stood the old nurses' quarters. By the time I arrived, part of that area was being used as accommodation for people from all sorts of backgrounds and histories. I had no idea then about the American nurses who had once lived there, or that the building had reportedly been guarded behind barbed wire. To me, it was simply another strange old building on an already strange property.

It certainly wasn't where I had imagined myself ending up, but I was quickly running out of options. I drove the Bedford into the property and met the caretaker. After explaining my situation, we managed to come to an arrangement. For fifty dollars a week, I could park the bus there and have access to power, water and a building I could use for storage. Considering my financial position, fifty dollars a week sounded

pretty good to me.

The caretaker explained where I needed to go, handed me some keys to the storage building and gave me directions to my allocated parking spot. I climbed back into the Bedford and headed down through the property. The old bus creaked and groaned its way along the road until eventually I found the area he had described. I manoeuvred it into position, switched off the engine and sat there for a moment looking around. I'd done it. I finally had somewhere to park my home, and for the first time since buying the bus, I felt like the plan might actually work.

Then I decided to inspect my new storage building.



On one side of the small standalone building was what appeared to be a disused shower and toilet area. I opened the rickety door and immediately discovered that "disused" didn't quite describe it. The toilet had obviously been used many times over the decades, but apparently nobody had felt the need to flush it.

Old faeces and crusted toilet paper covered the toilet and parts of the floor. I took one look, pulled the door closed again and decided that whatever facilities I eventually used while living there, that toilet wasn't going to be one of them.

I walked around to the main entrance of the building and tried the key the caretaker had given me. The lock turned, but the door wouldn't move. I pushed harder, but it was jammed solid. Judging by the condition of everything around it, nobody had been inside for years. I worked the lock backwards and forwards, pulled at the handle and eventually started shoulder-barging the door. After several attempts, something finally gave way and the old door slowly creaked open.

Inside was absolute chaos. The building was packed with so much old junk that I could barely move through it, but there was something else I noticed almost immediately. It was cold. Not just slightly cooler than outside, but noticeably cold. There was a distinct chill inside that little building, enough that I became aware of it the moment I stepped through the doorway.

As I started looking around, the first thing that struck me was the size of the doorways. They were unusually wide, far wider than I would have expected in such a small building. Then I began noticing what was sitting on the shelves around me. There were old hoses, pieces of medical equipment and strange contraptions and fittings that clearly belonged to another era. Some of it looked as though it had been sitting exactly where somebody had left it decades earlier.

I moved further into the room and noticed a large stainless-steel bench sitting in the centre. It was unusually wide and had a drain positioned directly in the middle of it. I stood there staring at it for a moment, then looked back at the oversized doorways, the old hoses and the medical equipment scattered around the room.

Suddenly, everything came together.

I realised I was standing inside a morgue.

Whatever excitement I'd had about my fantastic new storage building disappeared instantly. Death and anything associated with it had never been a friend of mine. I'd already experienced enough of that in my life, and there was absolutely no part of me interested in spending my evenings rummaging around inside an abandoned hospital morgue. I turned around and got out of there with considerably more haste than I had entered.



I walked straight back up the property and found the caretaker. I said to him, "Hey, that old building you've got me parked next to..." Before I could really explain what I had discovered, he casually replied, "Oh, the old morgue?" Well, that confirmed my suspicions.

I politely asked whether there might be somewhere else on the property where I could park the Bedford. Thankfully, he gave me another option and explained how to get there. I headed back to the bus feeling considerably happier about my prospects, started the Bedford and drove over to investigate my alternative home.

Unfortunately, there was one fairly significant problem. The new parking area was tight. Very tight. I tried approaching it from one direction, backed up and tried another angle, then manoeuvred forwards, backwards and sideways while turning that enormous steering wheel and trying everything I could think of to squeeze the Bedford into the space. It was no use. The bus simply wasn't going to fit.

Eventually, I stopped trying and sat behind the wheel for a moment, accepting the reality of the situation. There was only one place on the property where the Bedford was going to fit, and unfortunately it came with a rather unusual neighbour.



I drove back through the old hospital grounds, past the ageing buildings and down to my original parking spot. I manoeuvred the Bedford back into position, switched off the engine and looked through the window at the little building sitting beside me.

Of all the places I could have ended up living, somehow I'd managed to park my home beside an old hospital morgue. Still, it was fifty dollars a week, with power and water included.

And I certainly wasn't going to have any trouble with noisy neighbours.

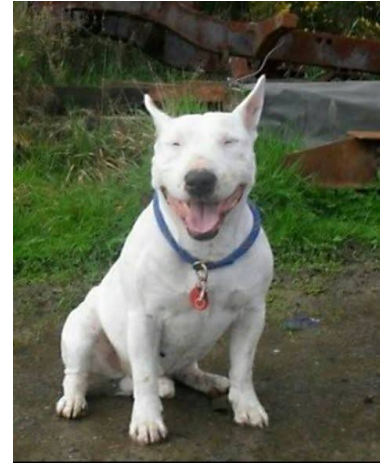
I was staying.

CHAPTER 11

JAKE

For the next nine months or so, I continued living beside the morgue. I had a girlfriend at the time who stayed with me on and off. She was someone I had known for most of my life through the church and had plenty of her own dramas going on. At times, she brought her own form of chaos into a life that was already becoming increasingly complicated. For the purposes of this story, I will call her Zara.

Around the same time, Des gave me a Staffy crossed with an English Bull Terrier puppy. I named him Jake, although he quickly became known as Jake the Muss. From the moment he came into my life, we were inseparable.



Wherever I went, Jake came with me. If I wandered around the property, he followed close behind. If I jumped into my Subaru to go somewhere, Jake was straight in beside me, usually with his head hanging out the window and his face in the wind. He didn't care where we were going. As long as he was coming with me, he was happy.

Living in the bus on a limited income meant I had to become resourceful. Fortunately, there was a company across the creek that dealt with skip-bin removal, so discarded building materials weren't difficult to find. Timber, fittings and anything else that looked remotely useful would make its way back across the creek and into the bus. Other people's rubbish became my building supplies, and slowly I managed to make the old Bedford more comfortable without spending money I didn't have.

By then, the bus had also earned itself a name: the Can-a-Bus.

I was smoking plenty of cannabis and had started selling small quantities to close friends and their friends to supplement my limited income. It wasn't something I'm proud of, but at the time it seemed like something I could manage while trying to understand my illness and what it meant for my ability to work. I wasn't thinking particularly far ahead. I was dealing with whatever problem was directly in front of me.

The morgue remained completely off limits. There was something about that building none of us particularly wanted to investigate. A light outside it would flicker throughout the night, adding to its already creepy appearance. There was probably a perfectly ordinary explanation for it, but an old morgue didn't need much help becoming unsettling after dark.

The rest of the property, however, was fair game. My friends and I would go on missions exploring the old hospital grounds, peering through broken windows, pushing our way through bushes and looking underneath abandoned buildings. There

always seemed to be another forgotten corner to investigate.

During one of those missions, we stumbled across a huge cylinder of nitrous oxide. Nitrous oxide, commonly known as laughing gas, has long been used medically for pain relief and anaesthesia, including in hospitals and dentistry. It also has commercial uses, including in whipped-cream dispensers. In Australia, the small cartridges containing nitrous oxide are commonly called "nangs", and the gas is sometimes inhaled recreationally for its brief intoxicating effect.

What we had found was considerably larger than a nang. It looked like a lifetime supply.

Exactly why the cylinder was still there, I don't know. Given that we were exploring the grounds of an old hospital, it wasn't difficult to imagine how medical gas might once have been used on the property, but I have no idea whether that particular cylinder dated back to the hospital or had arrived there sometime later. We weren't particularly interested in its history anyway. We were interested in what was inside it.

Before long, we were getting stoned and inhaling the nitrous oxide, sometimes taking enough that we would briefly black out. We treated it like another adventure without giving much thought to what we were actually doing. Looking back, it was incredibly careless and stupid.

Drug education had played very little part in my life. This was before information could instantly be found on a phone or pushed in front of you through social media. Most of what we thought we knew about drugs came from other people who used them. Someone tried something, told everyone else about it, and before long someone else was having a go. If nothing terrible happened immediately, that was often enough evidence for us to decide it was safe.

Unfortunately, life sometimes provided the education later.

Away from the stupidity and adventures with my friends, things weren't going particularly well for me. My illness had changed the direction of my life, money was tight, and the practical reality of living in the bus was becoming difficult. Even basic things like showering and going to the toilet were a hassle. Facilities were available up at the nurses' quarters, but I never felt comfortable walking up there to use them. What had started as an alternative way of living was becoming harder to deal with as the months went by.

My relationship with Zara wasn't particularly stable either. We had good times, but there were also arguments and plenty of tension. When two people are already carrying their own problems, living together on and off inside an old bus doesn't exactly give either of them much room to escape when things go wrong.

Gradually, I became depressed. I didn't really recognise it for what it was at the time. I simply knew that I was struggling. My future had become uncertain, my body was

doing things I couldn't control, and I had no clear idea what I was supposed to do next.

Jake became the one uncomplicated part of my life. He was always pleased to see me. He didn't care what kind of day I was having or what mistakes I had made. Whether we were wandering around Silverstream or driving somewhere in the Subaru with his head hanging out the window, he simply wanted to be beside me.

One day, after another argument with Zara, I reached a point I had never experienced before. Everything felt like too much, and for the first time in my life, I decided I didn't want to keep going.

Inside the bus, I tied a noose around my neck and secured the rope to an interior rail in the ceiling. I dropped onto my knees and felt it tighten brutally around my neck.

Then I heard Jake whimper.

I looked across at him. My little puppy was staring directly at me. He couldn't understand what I was doing, but he knew something was wrong. There was a look in his eyes that I have never forgotten.

For whatever reason, it broke through the darkness in my head. I stood back up and struggled with the rope until I managed to loosen it and pull the noose free from around my neck.

Then I looked at Jake again.

He had no idea what had just happened. He was simply my dog, standing there waiting for his mate. But that little whimper had been enough to make me stand.

Many years later, I can still picture him looking at me inside that bus. Of all the things that could have interrupted that moment, it was Jake.

My little mate.

Jake had just saved my life.

CHAPTER 12

THE BELT OF A LIFETIME

For the next six months or so, I continued living in the bus beside the old morgue. By then, I had become accustomed to many of the strange realities of living where I did. The bus was home, whether it looked like one to anyone else or not, and I had learned to make do with what I had.

Some things, however, were becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Going to the toilet and having somewhere to shower were two of the biggest problems.

These are simple things when you live in a normal house. You wake up, walk into the bathroom, turn on the tap and hot water comes out. When you don't have those things, basic hygiene suddenly becomes something you have to plan around.

I would sometimes go several days without having a shower. I certainly wasn't taking particularly good care of myself, and gradually I think I just became used to it. When your life becomes unconventional enough, things that would once have bothered you can quickly become normal.

Eventually, I decided to clean up the old toilet and shower area attached to the outside of the morgue. It had been sitting neglected and wasn't exactly inviting, but I wasn't in a position to be fussy. I cleared it out, cleaned it up as best I could and eventually managed to get the shower working somewhat.

There was no hot water. Every shower was absolutely freezing, especially during the colder months, but it was better than having nowhere to wash at all. Having a toilet and a functioning shower only a short walk from the bus made life considerably easier. It wasn't much, but when you're living with very little, even basic things can feel like an improvement.

The physical side of living there was one thing. The loneliness was another.

I was feeling increasingly isolated during those months. Zara would stay with me from time to time, but she came and went when she pleased. I never really knew how long she was going to be around, and that uncertainty caused me a lot of anxiety. When she was there, at least I had company. When she disappeared again, the bus could suddenly feel very empty.

I wasn't particularly good at dealing with any of it. I cried a lot during that period. There were times when the isolation would get on top of me and I would simply sit there wondering what I was doing with myself.



Jake made those nights easier. He didn't come and go. Wherever I was, Jake wanted to be there too. He had become my constant companion, and having him around made an enormous difference. Dogs don't care what your bank account looks like, where you live or whether your life makes sense to anybody else. Jake just wanted to be beside me. There was something comforting about that kind of loyalty.

The property itself could be an eerie place at night. During the day, the old buildings were simply old buildings, but darkness changed the atmosphere completely. The valley became quiet, the surrounding bush disappeared into blackness and the old hospital buildings took on a very different character. On foggy nights, it could feel like the rest of the world had disappeared altogether.

I had lived there long enough that most of it didn't bother me anymore. Strange noises were simply part of the place. Old buildings creaked, things moved in the wind, and wildlife had a habit of making noises that sounded far more sinister at two o'clock in the morning than they did during daylight.

Then one night, a massive storm rolled through the valley. The weather became wild. Wind tore through the trees while heavy rain hammered against the metal roof of the bus. Thunder rolled overhead, followed by flashes of lightning that briefly lit up the buildings around me.

I was lying in bed with Jake beside me, listening to it all, when another sound began to stand out amongst the wind, rain and thunder.

A door was slamming.

At first, I ignored it. With weather like that, something banging around outside wasn't exactly surprising. I had no intention of leaving the bus to investigate, so I tried to put it out of my mind. But it kept going. The wind would catch the door, throw it open and slam it shut. Sometimes there would be a short gap, giving me just enough time to think it might finally have stopped before it started again.

After several hours, I'd had enough. There was clearly going to be no sleep until somebody dealt with it, and there wasn't anybody else volunteering for the job.

I got out of bed and headed outside. I didn't bother putting shoes on. I just ran barefoot through the belting rain towards the morgue, trying to work out which door was causing the problem. Within seconds I was soaked.

When I rounded the corner of the building, I found it. It was the toilet door, being repeatedly thrown backwards and forwards by the wind. I ran into the shower area to get out of the rain and reached for the light switch.

There was a flash.

An enormous electrical shock went straight through my body.

After that, everything disappeared.

I don't know how long I was unconscious. The next thing I remember clearly was opening my eyes and finding myself lying flat on my back outside in the pouring rain. For a few moments, I didn't really understand where I was or what had happened. Rain was falling directly onto my face, I was completely soaked, and my body hurt.

There was a burn on my finger and burns on the soles of my feet.

The old Bakelite light fitting had several cracks through it and had come loose during the storm, exposing the 240-volt wiring behind it. I had run into the shower area soaking wet and barefoot, reached for the switch and made contact with the live electricity.

How I survived it, I don't know.

There wasn't anybody standing nearby to help me. Nobody had seen what happened. I had simply woken up alone in the rain.

Eventually, I managed to get myself upright. I was sore and shaken, and walking wasn't particularly pleasant with burns on the bottoms of my feet. I hobbled back around the morgue, through the rain and towards the bus.

When I finally got inside, I collapsed onto the couch. Jake was there beside me. I lay there wet, hurting and feeling very sorry for myself. It had been a fairly spectacular way to deal with a banging door, and at that moment I was mainly grateful that I was still alive.

Then, as I lay there, I became aware of something unusual.

Nothing was happening.

My body was still.

The jolting had stopped.

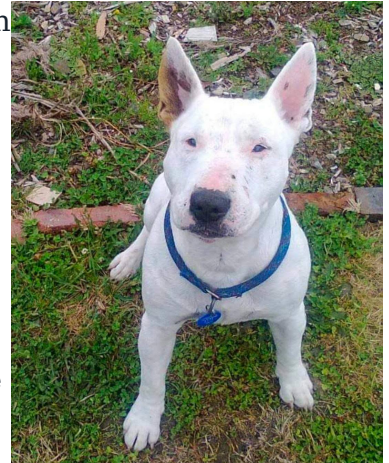
I waited for the familiar movement to come, but it didn't. For months, those violent jolts had been part of virtually every waking moment. I had become so accustomed to them that their absence felt strange. Now I was lying on the couch after being electrocuted, and there was suddenly nothing.

No involuntary movement. Just stillness.

I didn't know what to make of it. I had no medical explanation for what had happened, and I certainly wasn't going to pretend I understood it. All I knew was what I could feel in my own body.

For the first time in months, it was quiet.

Whatever happened that night could very easily have ended differently. Instead, I survived, and as strange as it sounds, the most powerful electrical shock of my life seemed to leave me with something I hadn't expected.



Stillness.

It really was the belt of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 13

THE BEGINNING

Within a day or two of being electrocuted, I went back to see my doctor and told him what had happened. After everything I had been through with the myoclonus, he was understandably in disbelief that another electric shock had been followed by the symptoms suddenly disappearing. He sent me for further testing to make sure there wasn't anything else going on, but from my point of view, the most important thing was that the violent jerking was gone.

With the myoclonus no longer affecting my daily life, I could finally start thinking about working again. I was genuinely excited about the possibility of getting back into employment and getting myself out of the situation I had ended up in. Living in the bus had given me somewhere to survive when I needed it, but I didn't want that to be my future.

I started applying for jobs everywhere, and before long I came across a position for an assistant manager at a very busy holiday park near Petone.

It was a large operation with powered and non-powered camping sites, cabins and motel accommodation. During the summer months, there could be around five hundred people staying there each night, so there was always plenty happening.

The job involved checking guests in, taking bookings, dealing with customer issues and complaints, general caretaking, building maintenance, laundry, booking Interislander ferry tickets and handling nighttime security. I would also be on call after hours when problems came up.

The role suited me. I was practical, could fix things and didn't mind dealing with people, but what really caught my attention was that it was a live-in position. The job came with a four-bedroom house on site and a huge garage. Right beside the house was also a large storage yard where I would be able to keep my bus.

It was exactly what I needed. One job could give me an income, a proper home and somewhere to store the bus.

I applied, went along for the interview and, to my surprise, got the job.

I wasted no time moving out of Silverstream. The old Bedford was taken from beside the former hospital and parked in the storage yard at the holiday park, while I moved into the house that came with the position.

Like a cat with nine lives, I had managed to land on my feet again.



Zara came with me, and I settled into the job quickly. I enjoyed the variety of the work because no two days were exactly the same. There were guests arriving and leaving, things around the property that needed repairing, bookings to organise and the occasional problem that needed sorting out after hours.

The roster also left me with enough spare time to make some extra money on the side.

With my mechanical background, buying and selling cars seemed like an obvious choice. I would find cheap vehicles that needed some work, buy them, repair whatever was wrong and then sell them for a profit. Sometimes I would buy a different car each week, work on it in the garage and have it sold by the following week.

Flipping cars came naturally to me. I understood vehicles, could do most of the repairs myself and now had a huge garage where I could work on them.

I also had a mate move into the house, so there was usually someone around. Life had become comfortable surprisingly quickly.

It was through one of my car deals that I met a bloke around my age who, for the purposes of this story, I will call Tim.

Tim seemed like a pretty good bloke when I first met him. We had similar interests and got along easily. He loved motorcycles and fast cars, enjoyed clubbing and liked having a good time. Before long we were hanging out regularly, riding motorcycles together, having barbecues at my place and going out on weekends.

There was another side to Tim's lifestyle as well.

He was into dr@gs, particularly ecstasy and something I had very little experience with at the time: m@thamphetamine, commonly known in New Zealand as P, short for pure.

I was hardly innocent when it came to dr@gs. I had already experimented with different substances and had spent plenty of time partying, so being around dr@gs wasn't particularly shocking to me. P was something new.

The weekends with Tim became big ones. We would start partying on Friday and sometimes wouldn't stop until Sunday evening. With P in the picture, staying awake for the entire weekend suddenly seemed easy.

At that stage, it felt like another part of the party. We had motorcycles, cars, barbecues, nightclubs and plenty of people around us. P gave me the energy to keep going when normally my body would have told me it was time to stop.

I had no idea what I had stumbled into.

Tim would eventually prove to be an unstable and dangerous person, and our friendship would become one of the most toxic relationships of my life. But I couldn't

see that when I first met him. He was a new mate who enjoyed many of the same things I did.

More importantly, I couldn't see what P was going to become.

At the time, it was something we took on weekends to keep the party going.

I didn't know that those weekends were the beginning of a twenty-five-year addiction.

CHAPTER 14

GOODBYE GRANDMA

Life at the holiday park was going reasonably well. I had settled into the job, had a decent place to live and, from the outside at least, things probably looked as though they had finally started coming together for me. My relationship with Zara, however, was a different story.

There had been too much inconsistency for too long. The coming and going, the uncertainty and the stress that came with it had eventually worn me down. I had reached the point where I didn't want to keep living like that anymore. Whatever feelings were still there between us weren't enough to make the relationship work, and eventually I decided it was time to let her go.



We parted on good terms. There wasn't some huge explosive ending or dramatic fallout between us. We accepted that the relationship had run its course and went our separate ways. Jake remained a connection between us, and we shared custody of him in our own way. He lived with me but would occasionally spend time with Zara as well. Jake had become such an important part of my life that making sure he was looked after mattered more than whatever had happened between the two of us.

I was now single and in my early twenties, with a house, a job and enough freedom to do whatever I wanted outside of work. As far as I was concerned, I was young, single and able to mingle. The partying continued.

What had started as something mainly reserved for weekends gradually began creeping into the rest of the week. P was becoming a more regular part of my life, although I certainly wasn't looking at myself as someone developing a serious drug problem. At that stage, I could still point to everything I had around me as evidence that I was doing alright. I had a job, I had somewhere to live, I was earning money and I was turning up for work. In my mind, those things separated me from whatever picture I had of an addict.

The problem was that P came with a price. What goes up eventually has to come down. After staying awake and partying for an entire weekend, my body wanted sleep. Not a normal night's sleep, either. The crash could wipe me out, and I had a job that I relied on. I couldn't disappear into bed for days every time a weekend ended. There were guests to deal with, bookings to manage, maintenance to take care of and responsibilities that weren't going to wait for me to recover.

The answer I found was also the thing making the problem worse. Instead of allowing myself to come down, I started using P on more than just the weekends. At the time, it could be justified as a way of keeping myself functioning. If I was exhausted and had

to work, using again could push the crash further away. It wasn't yet about abandoning my responsibilities. In a strange way, I was using it because I thought it was helping me meet them.

That was one of the dangerous things about P. The line didn't suddenly move overnight. There wasn't one morning when I woke up and announced to myself that I was going to become addicted to m@thamphetamine. The boundaries shifted gradually. A dr#g that had belonged to Friday and Saturday nights began finding its way into weekdays.

For the time being, I kept moving forward.

Then, in 2002, I received a phone call that brought everything else to a halt. My grandma had died in Tauranga.

I was devastated.

Grandma and I had shared a special bond throughout my life. She had been one of those people who had always mattered to me, and losing her carried a weight that was difficult to put into words. There are some people you grow up assuming will always be somewhere in the background of your life, even though you know that can't possibly be true. Grandma had been one of those people for me.

My best mate Richard and I drove up to Tauranga for the funeral. Richard had already been a close mate for years, and all these years later he is still my best friend. We now live in different countries and our lives have taken us in different directions, but the friendship has remained. Having him beside me for that trip to farewell Grandma meant a lot.

Before she was buried, I went to the funeral home to see her. Standing there knowing that this was the last time I would ever see her was incredibly difficult. There wasn't anything left to fix, change or postpone. This was goodbye.

I said my farewell and thanked her for being part of my life. There was so much contained in those few words. I was thanking her for the years, the memories, the love and the bond we had shared. I couldn't take any of it with me physically, but I could acknowledge what she had meant to me before I walked away.

Grandma had asked to be buried in the same cemetery as my grandad. Knowing they would be together felt right, but there was one part of the burial that didn't sit comfortably with me. I didn't want the final act of putting my grandma to rest to be completed by a machine. She deserved something more personal than that.

After the funeral had finished and everyone else had left, Richard and I stayed behind. We asked for permission to fill Grandma's grave ourselves, by hand. Permission was given, so that is exactly what we did.

Shovelful by shovelful, Richard and I filled her grave. It was physical work, but I didn't mind. In fact, I wanted to do it. There was something deeply personal about being the one to finish the job rather than standing back while machinery did it. It gave me one final thing I could do for her.

There wasn't anything grand about it. It was simply two young blokes with shovels, staying behind after everyone else had gone. But to me, it meant something. When we finished, I knew I had done everything I could to give my beautiful grandma the respectful farewell I felt she deserved.

Later that afternoon, Richard and I went to a bar at a small restaurant where we were staying. After the emotion of the funeral and filling the grave, sitting down for a drink gave us a chance to unwind.

There was a young woman working behind the counter who served us. Her name was Steph.

We started talking and seemed to hit it off. Steph was around seven years younger than me, and there was something about her that caught my attention. I wasn't standing there thinking about relationships, families or what the future might hold. My grandma had just been buried, and my head was hardly in a place where I was planning the next stage of my life.

We talked, I got Steph's phone number, and eventually Richard and I headed back home.

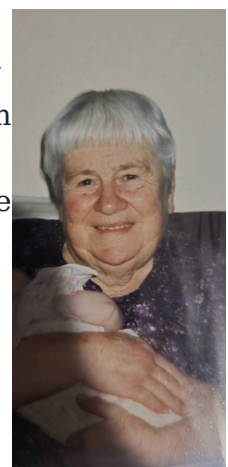
For the next six months or so, Steph and I kept in contact on and off. There were phone calls and conversations, but with us living in different places, nothing moved particularly quickly. Life at the holiday park continued, as did everything else I had going on at the time.

Eventually, I decided to make another trip to Tauranga.

At that point, I still had no idea how significant that chance meeting with Steph after Grandma's funeral would become. It is strange looking back at the moments that change the direction of your life. Most of them don't arrive with any warning. There isn't a sign telling you to pay attention because the person standing in front of you is going to become an important part of your story.

That afternoon in Tauranga felt like nothing more than a chance encounter between two people who happened to get along. I couldn't possibly have known where it would lead.

Steph, the young woman who served me that day, would eventually become the mother of my two eldest sons.



On one of the saddest days of my life, while saying goodbye to someone I loved deeply, I had unknowingly met someone who would become connected to two people I had yet to meet, but who would one day mean the world to me.

CHAPTER 15

A LINE I WOULDN'T CROSS

Steph and I had been dating for around a year and a half when she made the brave decision to leave the life she knew and move down to Lower Hutt to live with me. It was a major step for both of us, but especially for her. She was moving away from everything familiar and placing a great deal of trust in our relationship and the future we hoped to build together.



I was genuinely happy to have her there. After so much uncertainty in my life, it felt as though things were finally moving in a better direction. I had someone beside me who wanted to share a life with me, and for the first time in a long while, I began looking towards the future with some confidence. There was still partying in my life, and I was still using P, but I was working and trying to maintain the appearance of stability.

Only a couple of months after Steph moved in, she told me she was pregnant.

I was ecstatic. The news filled me with an excitement unlike anything I had experienced before, but it also frightened me. In approximately nine months, I was going to become a father. I understood what the word meant, but I had no real idea of what being a father involved. My own experiences had not exactly given me a clear example to follow. I did not have a lifetime of memories with my father to draw from or a close relationship that had taught me what a dependable dad looked like.

I wondered whether I would know what to do when my son arrived. I questioned whether I could provide for him, protect him and give him the kind of childhood every child deserved. There was no longer going to be only me to think about. A tiny human being was coming into the world who would depend on Steph and me for absolutely everything. That realisation brought happiness, pressure and fear all at once.

Despite my concerns, I was looking forward to becoming a dad. Steph and I began preparing for the baby together. We attended antenatal classes, learning about pregnancy, childbirth and what to expect during those first exhausting weeks at home. We listened as people explained feeding, sleeping, changing nappies and how to hold a newborn correctly. It was a completely unfamiliar world to me, but I tried to take it all in.

We bought the things we believed we would need and slowly began assembling a life for someone we had not yet met. There were baby clothes, blankets, nappies and all the other items that suddenly become necessary when a child is on the way. Each purchase made the pregnancy feel more real. The future was no longer some distant idea. It was arriving, whether I felt ready for it or not.

Steph continued working at a local bar in Petone while I kept working as well. Our routines carried on much as they had before, although everything now revolved around the approaching birth. We had appointments to attend, decisions to make and a home to prepare. Steph's body was changing, our responsibilities were growing and the countdown had begun.

I still went out with my friends occasionally. At that stage, I had not completely separated my old social life from the new family life forming around me. Part of me was preparing to become a father, while another part continued behaving as though very little needed to change. I believed I could somehow keep both worlds running alongside each other.

One of the people I continued spending time with was Tim. Over the previous months, I had noticed a change in him. Tim had a background in boxing and knew how to handle himself physically. When he was sober, things could be fine, but alcohol often brought out a level of aggression that made him difficult to predict. When large amounts of P were added to the situation, that unpredictability became far worse.

A normal night out could turn into an argument without much warning. A glance from somebody across a bar, a careless comment or a minor disagreement could be enough to set something off. Before long, voices would be raised, people would be squaring up and a fight would begin.

I was never interested in that kind of behaviour. I went out to enjoy myself, listen to music, have a drink and spend time with my friends. I did not want to spend my nights watching every person in the room, wondering whether something was about to erupt. However, when trouble followed someone you were with, it had a way of dragging everybody nearby into it.

There had been occasions when Tim became involved in fights and I found myself caught in the middle, even though I had no desire to be there. I might be trying to calm the situation, pull someone away or prevent things from getting worse, only to end up looking as though I was part of the brawl. It became exhausting and increasingly dangerous.

Eventually, I warned him that I had reached my limit. I told him that if the fighting continued, I would leave immediately. I would not hang around to rescue him, defend him or become involved in whatever happened next. He was responsible for his own behaviour, and I was no longer willing to allow it to become my problem.

One night, Tim and I headed into the city. We had arranged to meet his father, who was always up for a good time. The intention was to have a few drinks and enjoy the night together, but once again, there was an altercation at one of the bars.

I do not remember every detail of what started it, but I knew I had seen enough. I had already made my position clear, and I was not prepared to become involved in another fight. I left Tim and his father in the city and went home. They continued the night

without me.

At some point after I left, there was reportedly an incident between Tim and his father. It was described by some as an altercation and by others as a form of play fighting. According to the account I later heard, Tim either pushed or struck his father, causing him to fall backwards and hit his head on a concrete kerb. Rather than the night ending immediately, his father was reportedly placed in a taxi and sent home. Tim remained in the city and continued with his evening.

I was not there when it happened, so I can only describe what I was later told. What followed was a period of uncertainty, conflicting stories and unanswered questions. Over the following week, including the Christmas period, Tim's father was said to have remained at home, mostly in bed and feeling increasingly unwell. From what I later understood, he was largely left alone during that time.

Tim continued with his Christmas celebrations, and as far as I was aware, he did not tell those around him just how unwell his father had become. Nobody seemed to understand the seriousness of his condition or what had happened in the days leading up to it. For approximately a week after that night, his father remained sick and alone while life carried on around him.

His condition did not improve. He later died from a head injury.

There were also unconfirmed reports that he may have sustained the fatal injury during a separate altercation around the same period. Different versions of events began circulating, and it became difficult to determine where fact ended and rumour began. What was certain was that a man had lost his life and a family was left dealing with the consequences.

In due course, the circumstances surrounding his death led to court proceedings involving Tim.

As the case approached, Tim asked me to give evidence. What he wanted me to say did not match what I understood to be true. Although I had left before the incident between him and his father occurred, I knew what I had witnessed earlier in the night and what I had been told afterwards. I was not prepared to go into court and give evidence that contradicted my honest recollection.

I refused.

It was not a decision I made lightly. Tim had been my friend, and refusing to support him in the way he wanted could have consequences of its own. By then, however, I had seen enough to understand what his life was becoming. The aggression, drug use and constant threat of violence were no longer isolated incidents that could be dismissed as someone having a bad night. They had developed into a pattern.

I also knew that being asked to alter my account crossed a line. Friendship did not require me to lie or place myself in legal jeopardy. Whatever had happened after I left the city, I was not going to allow loyalty to be used as a reason to abandon the truth.

For the first time, I looked at Tim without making excuses for him. He had become dangerous, violent and deeply unpredictable. I could not know what would happen whenever he drank or used large amounts of P, and I did not want to find out how much worse things could become.

Distancing myself from him was not only about protecting myself anymore. Steph was pregnant with our first child. I had a son on the way and a family beginning to take shape around me. My decisions would soon affect someone who had no say in the life he was being born into.

I could not continue placing myself in situations where a night out might end with police, hospitalisation or another tragedy. I did not want my son growing up with a father who was repeatedly caught in other people's violence. I had already experienced enough instability in my own childhood to understand the damage it could cause.

There were many parts of my life that still needed to change, even if I could not yet admit the full extent of them. My own dr#g use had not disappeared, and becoming a father would not magically repair everything that was wrong. However, I could recognise that Tim's path was heading somewhere I did not want to follow.

His father's death changed the way I saw our friendship. It showed me how quickly aggression could produce consequences that could never be undone. A push, a punch or a fall could transform several lives in a matter of seconds. Whatever the complete truth of that night may have been, I knew I wanted no further part in the violence and chaos surrounding him.

Walking away from Tim became one of my first serious attempts to draw a boundary between the life I had been living and the life I hoped to create. It did not mean I had suddenly become responsible in every area, nor did it mean I fully understood what fatherhood would demand from me. It meant that, for once, I could see trouble approaching and chose not to wait until it destroyed something else.

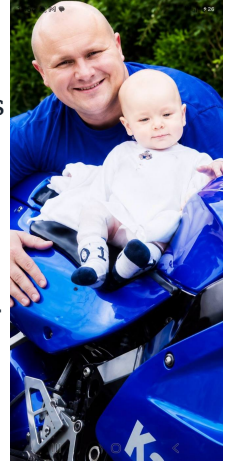
My son was coming.

It was time to start deciding what kind of man would be waiting for him.

CHAPTER 16

“F#CK BEAU, YOU K1LL US ALL!”

On 19 June 2005, my life changed forever. My firstborn son, Kane Haywood, was born at Lower Hutt Hospital. I was 26 years old, and I was there for his birth. I cut the umbilical cord, and not long afterwards he was passed into my arms. I can still remember looking down at him as he opened his eyes and seemed to look straight into mine. I remember thinking to myself, We are going to be best friends forever. There are certain moments in life that become permanently etched into your memory, and holding my firstborn son for the first time was one of them. It was, without question, one of the happiest days of my life.



By then, I had been working at the Petone holiday park for around six years. It had been a significant chapter of my life, but I was beginning to feel that it was time for a change. The old Bedford bus that I had once called home had remained in the storage yard beside the house for years, but eventually I sold it. That bus had carried me through a completely different period of my life, and watching it finally leave felt like another small sign that things were moving forward.

The storage yard itself was full of forgotten projects. There were old caravans, cars and all sorts of other things people had left behind over the years. Among them was an old boat that had caught my attention. It had been sitting there for around five years without anyone coming near it or paying any storage fees, so eventually I decided to see if I could track down its owner.

I went to see some friends at NZ Post, who helped me obtain the details of the last registered owner, and I called around to the address. The gentleman who answered the door was shocked when I explained why I was there. He told me that around six years earlier, somebody had been interested in buying the boat and had taken it away as part of the potential sale. The prospective buyer had never returned it. As far as he knew, his boat had disappeared years earlier. Now I was standing at his door telling him not only that I knew exactly where it was, but that it had also potentially accumulated a rather impressive storage bill.

We quickly came to an arrangement. If he didn't want the boat back, I would forget about the storage fees. That agreement worked pretty well for both of us, and just like that, the boat was mine. After sitting around for so long, it needed some attention. I did some work on the engine, repaired some of the fibreglass and eventually got it back into reasonable condition. Then it was time to launch my newest toy into Wellington Harbour.

For the first half-dozen trips or so, the boat was actually pretty reliable. My mates and I had plenty of fun with it, although our interpretation of responsible boating probably

differed considerably from that of the average Coastguard volunteer. One of our favourite activities involved getting the boat up to full speed and then jumping off it at the same time, because apparently simply sitting inside a perfectly functional boat wasn't entertaining enough. Nevertheless, it kept running, nobody died, and my confidence in my bargain boat continued to grow.

Then came one beautiful summer's day when my older brother and I decided to head out onto Wellington Harbour. It was one of those stunning days where the water was alive with activity. Yachts were everywhere, boats were moving around the harbour and people were out enjoying the sunshine. We decided to head towards one of the islands near the harbour entrance, out towards Cook Strait. The plan was simple: find somewhere to stop, have a barbecue, lie in the sun and enjoy the afternoon.

We found our spot, fired up the barbecue and settled in. At some point, apparently feeling completely confident in both the weather and my boating abilities, I fell asleep. A couple of hours later I woke up, looked around and immediately realised something had changed. The harbour was empty. The yachts were gone, the boats were gone, and everybody who had been enjoying the water earlier seemed to have disappeared.

Then I looked south.

Coming towards us was the biggest, blackest and meanest-looking weather front I had ever seen in my life. We didn't need a weather forecast to tell us what was about to happen. We threw everything into the boat, fired it up and headed towards Petone as quickly as we could.

Wellington Harbour might look relatively small when you're standing safely on land looking across it, but when you're sitting in a small boat in the middle of it with a massive storm chasing you, it suddenly becomes very, very large. We hadn't travelled far when the engine began to splutter. Then it started running on what sounded like one cylinder, and we rapidly lost power.

Without enough power, the boat couldn't properly ride the increasingly rough waves. The bow would rise and fall, and then another wave would come crashing over us. Water began pouring into the boat. My brother grabbed a bucket and started bailing, but every time he managed to throw some water out, another wave seemed determined to put twice as much back in.

The storm had caught us. Wave after wave dumped more water into the boat while the engine struggled to keep us moving. My brother was bailing as fast as he could when he finally turned towards me, bucket in hand, and yelled over the wind and waves, "F#ck Beau, you k1ll us all!"

I couldn't exactly argue with his assessment.

Things were starting to look pretty bloody serious. For the first time, I began genuinely wondering whether we were going to make it back. Then, through the noise

of the storm and the struggling engine, I heard something above us. It was a helicopter. I looked up and saw the Westpac Trust Rescue Helicopter hovering overhead.

You would think seeing a rescue helicopter while your boat was filling with water would bring an overwhelming feeling of relief. Not me. My heart sank. Back in those days, if the rescue helicopter had to pluck two idiots out of Wellington Harbour during a storm, there was a pretty good chance those same two idiots were going to appear on the six o'clock news. I remember looking up at that helicopter and thinking, Just sink me now. At that particular moment, I genuinely wasn't sure what concerned me more — drowning in Wellington Harbour or surviving and having everyone I knew watch the rescue on television that night.

Fortunately, somehow, the old boat kept going. That struggling engine continued doing just enough to keep us moving while my brother desperately bailed water. Slowly and painfully, we made our way back across the harbour until eventually we reached Petone, where our car and trailer were still sitting waiting for us.

The boat was absolutely full of water, and it took what felt like forever to drain it before we could finally get it onto the trailer. But we were alive, the boat was still in one piece and, perhaps most importantly to my wounded pride, I didn't make the six o'clock news.

After surviving that little adventure, I decided boating might not be for me. I had owned more than a hundred motorcycles, survived an electric shock that probably should have killed me, lived in a bus beside an old morgue and made more questionable decisions than I could possibly count, but Wellington Harbour had taught me something important.

I belonged on land.

That was the last boat I would ever own.



CHAPTER 17

THE SHADOW

Within a few months of Kane being born, Steph and I decided it was time to move away from Wellington. There were a lot of reasons behind the decision. Tim was there, the party scene was there, and my dependence on P had become something I knew I needed to get away from. Becoming a father hadn't magically fixed any of that, but it had given me a reason to think differently about where my life was heading. I had Kane to think about now, and I wanted to give our little family a chance at something better.



We decided on Rotorua. I had found a job managing a small car rental business there, and it was much closer to Steph's family in Tauranga. With Kane still a baby, we hoped being closer to her family would give us some support while we found our feet as new parents. We also made an agreement before we left Wellington. We would give Rotorua a proper go, and if things didn't work out there, our next move would be Australia.

One of the hardest parts of leaving Wellington was knowing I couldn't take Jake with me. Jake was my beloved English Bull Terrier crossed with a Staffy, and he was far more than a pet. He was my best friend. He had been beside me through some of the strangest and most difficult years of my life, including my time living in the bus beside the old morgue. Wherever I went, Jake was usually there. Because Zara and I shared custody of him, taking him several hours away wasn't really an option. I made the difficult decision to leave him in her care. I knew she loved him and would look after him, but leaving my best mate behind still hurt like hell.

We loaded our furniture and belongings into a truck and headed north. It felt good to be doing something different. I had a new job waiting for me, Steph and I had our baby boy, and for the first time in a long while I was putting some real distance between myself and the environment I had been caught up in. I didn't know whether Rotorua was going to work, but at least we were giving ourselves a chance.

We found a beautiful rental house that had only recently come onto the market. The property had lovely gardens that had obviously been cared for extremely well. One of the conditions of our tenancy was that we had to keep the gardens up to scratch, which I was more than happy to do. Whoever had lived there before us had clearly put a lot of effort into the place, and I intended to keep it looking that way.

As we moved our furniture inside, we could see impressions in the carpet showing exactly where the previous occupant's furniture had been sitting. It made sense to put

ours in roughly the same places. The lounge suite went where theirs had been, and when we reached the master bedroom, we positioned our bed over the marks left by the previous bed. We didn't give it another thought. We unpacked our belongings, settled in and began getting used to life in Rotorua.

A couple of months later, I was sitting in the lounge one night watching television when I caught something moving out of the corner of my eye. It came from the direction of the kitchen and looked like a dark shadow moving quickly across the floor. I turned my head to look, but there was nothing there.

It wasn't the first time it had happened. I had noticed little movements around the house before, but they had always been quick enough for me to question whether I had actually seen anything at all. I put it down to being tired, my eyes playing tricks on me, or my imagination. Having a newborn baby certainly wasn't helping with the tiredness either.

This time I decided to mention it to Steph. I wasn't expecting much of a response, but what she said caught me completely off guard. She had been seeing things too. She had noticed similar movements in different parts of the house but hadn't said anything because she thought she might be imagining them. Neither of us had mentioned it to the other before that night, which made the whole thing feel a little more strange.

The following day I was talking to our neighbour and somehow the conversation turned to the person who had lived in our house before us. He told me an elderly lady had lived there and that she absolutely loved the gardens. Suddenly I understood why keeping them maintained had been made such an important part of the tenancy.

I asked him where she had moved to. I assumed he was going to tell me she had gone into a retirement home or moved in with family. Instead, his expression changed and his head dropped.

She hadn't moved.

She had died in the house.

Then he told me where.

She had died in her bed, in the master bedroom.

My mind immediately went back to the day we moved in and those impressions in the carpet. We had placed our bed exactly where hers had been. Without having any idea what had happened in that house, Steph and I had been sleeping in the exact spot where the previous occupant had died.

The hairs on my body stood up. Until then, I had never really believed in ghosts or anything supernatural. I had always been more inclined to look for a logical explanation, and maybe there was one. But learning that an elderly woman had died in our bedroom after both Steph and I had independently noticed strange shadows

moving around the house was enough to make me seriously question what we had been seeing.

When I got home, I told Steph what the neighbour had told me. That was it for me. I had no interest in hanging around to investigate whether the place was haunted or whether there was some perfectly reasonable explanation for everything. We had our newborn son living there with us, and I wasn't comfortable staying in the house anymore.

We found another rental and moved out. The new place was on a much colder side of Rotorua and was an older house, nowhere near as nice as the one we had left. I didn't care. From the day we moved in, there were no strange shadows, no unexplained movements and nothing else that made either of us uncomfortable. An older, colder house suddenly seemed like a pretty good deal.

I continued managing the rental car business for around a year. Rotorua had given us the opportunity to get away from Wellington and try a different life, but eventually I realised it wasn't where I wanted to stay. I wasn't enjoying the rental car business enough to see myself doing it long term, and Rotorua didn't feel like the place where I wanted to build our future.

That brought Steph and me back to the agreement we had made before leaving Wellington. If Rotorua didn't work out, we would move to Australia. What had once been our backup plan was now becoming very real.

Leaving New Zealand was a much bigger decision than moving between cities. Everything I had known was there. My family, my friends, my history and the places that had shaped me were all on that side of the Tasman. It was also where Jake was, and knowing I would now be leaving the country made saying goodbye to that part of my life even harder.

But I also knew I needed change. Staying somewhere because it was familiar hadn't always worked out particularly well for me. Sometimes the only way I knew how to find out what was ahead was to take the chance and go looking for it.

So after around a year in Rotorua, Steph and I made the decision.

We were selling up.

We were leaving New Zealand.

And we were moving to Australia.

CHAPTER 18

BEAU THE HUMAN BACKHOE

Moving to Australia was no easy task. As exciting as the idea of a fresh start was, the reality meant leaving Steph and Kane behind in New Zealand while I went ahead alone. The plan was for me to get established first, find work, secure somewhere for us to live and create enough stability for them to join me. I boarded the plane knowing I was leaving my little family on the other side of the Tasman, but also believing I was doing it to build something better for all of us.



When I arrived in Australia, I stayed with my sister for the first few weeks while I looked for work. I had hoped my experience at the holiday park in New Zealand would help me find something similar. I knew that kind of work, I was good at it, and I had years of experience behind me. I applied and looked around, but nothing came from it. I couldn't afford to sit around waiting for the perfect job, so when an opportunity came up labouring and laying pipes, I took it.

That first Australian summer nearly killed me.

I had absolutely no idea what I was in for. Working outside all day in the Queensland heat was a completely different experience from anything I had known in New Zealand. The sun was relentless, the work was physical, and there was nowhere to hide from it. I would finish the day exhausted, covered in dirt and sweat, wondering what the hell I had got myself into. But I had a reason to keep going. Steph and Kane were waiting for me, and every day I worked was another day closer to bringing them over.

Within about six months, things had started falling into place. I managed to buy a car, found a rental unit in Redcliffe and slowly bought the furniture we needed to turn an empty unit into a home. It wasn't anything flash, but to me it represented progress. I could finally look around and picture Steph and Kane living there with me. After months apart, I couldn't wait to have my little family together again.

I continued looking for better work and eventually landed a job doing formwork and concreting. It paid the bills, but there was nothing easy about it. A huge amount of the work was still done the old fashioned way, with picks, shovels and plenty of muscle. Apparently I had a talent for moving ridiculous amounts of dirt because it wasn't long before I earned myself a nickname on site.

"Beau the Human Backhoe."

If there was a hole to dig, ground to break up or dirt to move, apparently I was the machine for the job.

One day while working on site, I noticed another company working alongside us. Their work immediately caught my attention. They were doing mechanical installations, pipework and welding. Instead of spending the day hanging off the end of a shovel, these guys were building and installing things. There was skill involved, and I could see there was a trade behind what they were doing.

I wanted in.

I approached them and asked if they were looking for workers. Someone gave me the manager's number, and I made contact. About a week later, I had left the shovel behind and was working for them.

For the first time in a long time, I could see the possibility of an actual career rather than just another job. I threw myself into the work and tried to learn everything I could. Six months later, I was offered an adult apprenticeship as a mechanical fitter and welder.

I was absolutely stoked.

For someone who had spent much of his younger life bouncing from one thing to another, the idea of becoming qualified meant a lot to me. This wasn't just about earning money anymore. I was working towards something. There would eventually be a trade behind my name, something I had earned and something nobody could take away from me.

Then, on 9 March 2008, our family grew again when my second son, Zion Haywood, was born.

Conveniently, the unit Steph and I were renting was directly opposite Redcliffe Hospital. When the time came, we walked across to the maternity ward together. Several hours later, our baby boy had arrived. Before long, we were making the short journey back across the road, this time carrying Zion with us.

Life, from the outside, was going pretty well. I had started an adult apprenticeship, I had a partner, a two and a half year old son and now a newborn baby. I also had a GSXR 1100, which became my transport to and from work. That bike was more than a toy at the time. The company regularly sent me from Redcliffe all the way out to Ipswich and back, so having something that could get me through the traffic and cover the distance was incredibly useful.

But behind everything that appeared to be going right, the pressure was building.

I was the sole provider for our family and working six days a week, often doing long hours just to make ends meet. Adult apprentice wages didn't stretch very far when there was rent, food, bills, vehicles and two young children to support. Steph wasn't

working because she had been pregnant, we now had a newborn, and the cost of childcare made returning to work difficult anyway.

I felt an enormous responsibility sitting on my shoulders. I wanted to provide. I wanted my boys to have what they needed. I wanted the apprenticeship because I knew finishing it could give us a better future, but getting through those years meant surviving on less money while working harder than I ever had before.

Somewhere amongst the long hours, financial pressure, exhaustion and the demands of raising a young family, Steph and I began falling apart.

Not long after Zion was born, our relationship came to an end.

I had arrived in Australia with a plan. Find a job. Find a home. Bring my family over. Build a better life. For a while, I thought I had done exactly that. We had a roof over our heads, two beautiful boys, and I finally had a career path in front of me.

But having all the pieces doesn't mean you know how to hold them together.

When the relationship ended, I didn't see it as two people whose lives had reached a difficult point. I saw it as my failure. I felt as though I had failed Steph, failed my sons and failed myself.

I had worked so hard to bring my family across the Tasman and build us a new life.

Now I was watching that family come apart.

CHAPTER 19

I'VE SEEN SOME SH1T!

Once again, I found myself without a roof over my head. After everything I had done since arriving in Australia, buying a car, finding a rental, furnishing a home and bringing my little family across from New Zealand, I was back to relying on someone else for somewhere to stay. Thankfully, my younger sister and her little family opened their home to me. I was extremely grateful to have them, especially at a time when so much else in my life had become uncertain.



At least my apprenticeship was going well. I was working for a company specialising in water filtration, and when I signed up I thought I had a reasonable idea of what the job would involve. What I did not realise was that the company serviced sites all over Australia. Before long, I was being sent everywhere from Cairns to Tasmania, Canberra and plenty of places in between.

Whenever I was sent away, I would usually ask how long the job was expected to take. The answer was nearly always the same.

“About a week.”

I eventually learned that those three words meant absolutely nothing.

A week could become a month, and a month could become several months. At times I would spend up to six months working away, usually getting a long weekend back in Brisbane every three weeks or so. After a while, when someone told me to pack for a week, I packed like I might not see my wardrobe again until Christmas.

The work was far more specialised than anything I had done before. We built and installed large reverse osmosis skids, industrial filtration systems made up of pumps, pipework, valves, gauges and specialised membranes. Water was forced through the membranes under pressure, removing dissolved salts and other contaminants. Some of the systems were massive, and as an apprentice I was learning how all those individual components worked together to turn contaminated or unsuitable water into something usable.

That was the clean side of the business.

Then I discovered the company also carried out major overhauls and servicing on older systems.

Including sewage treatment plants.

For much of the next four years, I would find myself working right in the heart of human filth.

All I can say is, I have seen some sh1t.

A lot of sh1t.

And I do not say that lightly.

I have been splashed in it, drenched in it and had it end up in places where another human being's bodily waste should never be. Sometimes I would be elbow deep in a job when a mysterious droplet would land on my face. Both hands would be occupied, there would be no easy way to clean it off, so I would have to keep working.



Half an hour later I would absentmindedly lick my lips.

Then my brain would catch up.

Droplet.

Face.

Near mouth.

Oh no!!

By that stage, there was no point finding a rag. The incident had already resolved itself.

Sewage plants also have a smell that is almost impossible to explain to someone who has never worked in one. It does not just enter your nose. It moves in, signs a lease and starts rearranging the furniture. You could shower, scrub yourself clean, change your clothes and still wonder whether everyone around you could smell what you had been standing in all day.



Despite the disgusting side of it, I enjoyed learning the trade. I was working on major industrial equipment, solving problems and gaining experience that I never would have picked up doing ordinary construction work. I was also seeing parts of Australia I probably never would have visited otherwise, although spending twelve hours inside a sewage treatment plant was perhaps not the sightseeing experience most tourists had in mind.

Life after work could be almost as challenging as the job itself. The company would usually rent a house near the project and put several of us in together. That meant spending all day working with the same blokes, driving home with them, eating with them and then waking up the next morning to do it all again.

Sometimes everyone got along well.

Sometimes someone's breathing was enough to piss you off.

Being the apprentice meant I was at the bottom of the accommodation food chain. Nobody was handing me the master bedroom and ensuite. If there was a couch, it usually had my name on it. If there was one tiny bedroom that looked like it had previously been used to store a vacuum cleaner, I knew exactly where my bag was going.

After ten or twelve hours working with the same people, I often had no desire to spend the rest of the evening sitting around the house with them. If we were staying somewhere for a while, I would join a local gym. It gave me somewhere to go, kept me occupied and gave me a few precious hours away from the people I worked and lived with.

There was no real separation between work and home on those jobs. If you had an argument with someone during the day, you could not knock off and forget about them until tomorrow. You climbed into the same vehicle, went back to the same house and probably had to sit across from them while eating dinner. Then, if fortune was really smiling upon you, you could lie on your apprentice couch listening to them snore all night.

The part I struggled with most was being away from my boys. Those long weekends back in Brisbane became precious. I would have them with me at my sister's place and try to make the most of the short time we had before I had to leave again. I loved my kids, and although I was working hard to build a career and earn a living, there was always a cost attached to being away for so long.

That was why I grabbed any Brisbane based work I could get. I did not care how filthy or difficult the job was. After months of airports, shared houses and living out of a bag, being able to knock off work and remain in the same city as my children felt like a luxury.

It was a strange chapter of my life. I did not have a home of my own, yet I was building a career. I was an apprentice sleeping on couches, travelling around Australia and learning a specialised trade that would take me into some truly disgusting places.

I learned about pumps, filtration systems, reverse osmosis and sewage treatment.

I learned how to live with workmates without k1lling them.

And I learned never to lick my lips in a sewage plant.

Some lessons you learn from a textbook.

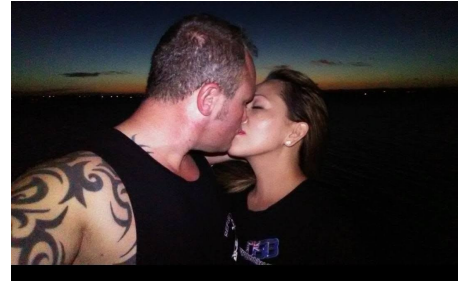
Others you only need to learn once.



CHAPTER 20

13 YEARS OF SH!T F@CKERY

By 2010, I was roughly halfway through my adult apprenticeship, juggling working away, spending whatever time I could with my kids, and trying to build something for my future. After years of instability, I finally had some direction. I was earning decent money, working towards a trade and beginning to think more seriously about what I wanted the rest of my life to look like.



I had also dabbled in internet dating. I wanted to meet someone I could eventually settle down with and build a life beside. That was how I met Jenny. Neither of us knew it at the time, but she would eventually become one of the most important people in my life. Unfortunately for her, before we got anywhere near that point, I was about to put this innocent woman through what can only be described as thirteen years of sh!t f@ckery.

I wouldn't exactly say we hit it off immediately. Our first date was at the Coffee Club, and afterwards she didn't even call me back. Apparently, I hadn't made quite the impression I thought I had. If I wanted another date, I was going to have to put in some genuine effort.

There was something different about Jenny. She had self respect, strong opinions and absolutely no intention of making things easy for me. Her stubbornness was something I admired, and I thought she was absolutely beautiful. The fact that she wasn't falling at my feet only made me more determined. I took it as a challenge. I wanted to make her mine.

In hindsight, if Jenny had been given even a five minute preview of what the next thirteen years were going to look like, I'm fairly certain she would have put down her coffee, picked up her handbag and run a mile without looking back. Truthfully, that probably would have been the sensible thing to do.

But I eventually managed to secure that second date, and slowly our dating turned into a relationship. It wasn't exactly a fairy tale romance. I was still working away regularly and, when I was home, I was kind of living at my sister's place or staying with Jenny whenever she would let me. Her attitude towards me remained reserved. Jenny wasn't someone who handed out trust freely, and I was going to have to earn my place in her life.

Before long, my apprenticeship came to an end and I finally completed my trade. I was proud of what I had achieved, but I'd had enough of working remotely. I'd spent years being sent all over Australia, sometimes for months at a time, never knowing where I

would be going next or how long I would be gone. The day I finished my apprenticeship, I left the company. I wanted a job closer to home, more time with my kids and some stability in my life.

During the years I had spent working away, my m@th use had remained fairly low. At the time, I considered it moderate recreational use. Because I could go away for long periods, work hard and function normally without it, I convinced myself there wasn't a problem. In my mind, people with dr@gs problems didn't hold down jobs, complete apprenticeships or spend their spare time training at the gym. I was doing all of those things, so I figured I was fine.

Unfortunately, my old mate Tim from New Zealand had also moved to Australia. Every now and then, when I managed to get an evening to myself, we would catch up and head into the city. Tim had always been able and willing to supply me with whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it, and our friendship gave me easy access back into a world I probably should have left behind.

By then, the gym had become a big part of my life. I trained regularly and wanted to get bigger, and Tim could help me out there too. Steroids entered the picture. Some of my workouts ended up being powered by a ridiculous combination of pre workout, m@th and synthetic testosterone. At the time, I thought it was fantastic. Looking back, it probably wasn't the smartest cocktail to be smashing before picking up heavy objects.

I gained size quickly. I became almost as wide as I was tall. My shoulders grew, my arms got bigger and my clothes became tighter. I loved the physical changes and the attention that came with them. Unfortunately, my muscles weren't the only thing growing.

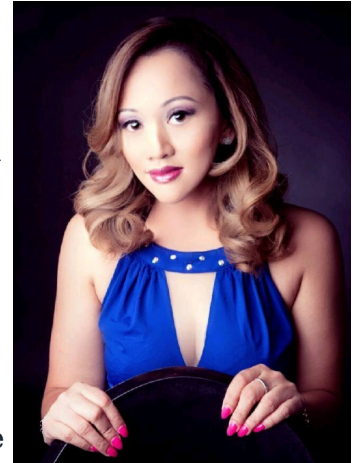
So was my ego.

The testosterone gave me an enormous amount of confidence, and in my case confidence had a habit of turning into arrogance. I liked being big. I liked being noticed. I walked around thinking I was ten feet tall and bulletproof, even if I was actually built more like a fridge with legs.

Jenny was considerably less impressed with my transformation than I was.

She didn't care how much I could bench press or how big my arms were. The ego that came with it was something she certainly didn't like or appreciate. While I was busy admiring what I saw in the mirror, Jenny was getting to know the person underneath it, and that person still had plenty of growing up to do.

There was also something I deliberately kept from her. Jenny hated dr@gs, and I knew exactly how strongly she felt about them. I knew that if she discovered I was using m@th or anything else, there was a very good chance she would kick me to the curb. I didn't want to lose her, but apparently I didn't want to stop what I was doing either.



So I hid it.

That became an early crack in the foundation of our relationship. Instead of making a choice between the lifestyle I had known and the woman I wanted to build a future with, I tried to keep both. I compartmentalised my life. There was the Beau who worked, trained, spent time with his kids and tried to build a relationship with Jenny, and there was another version who occasionally disappeared into the city with Tim and did things Jenny knew nothing about.

At the time, I didn't really consider what that dishonesty said about me. I told myself I loved Jenny, and I genuinely believed that I did. But when I look back at the man I was then, I have to ask myself what I actually understood about love.

Love doesn't lie, cheat, boast or deliberately hurt the person standing beside you. Yet I was capable of doing all of those things. I wanted Jenny's trust while keeping secrets from her. I wanted her loyalty while behaving in ways that didn't deserve it. I wanted a future with her without being prepared to give up the things that could eventually destroy that future.

The uncomfortable truth is that Jenny deserved better than the version of myself I was offering her.

I wasn't some monster, and there were plenty of good parts to our life together, but I was selfish. I wanted everything on my terms. I could work hard, be a father, hold down a good job and genuinely care about the people around me, while still making decisions that hurt them. For a long time, being functional allowed me to avoid looking too closely at my behaviour.

I still believed I was completely in control of the dr@gs. M@th was something I did occasionally. Steroids were something I used for the gym. I was working and building a career, so there was always something I could point towards as evidence that everything was fine.

What I couldn't see was how quickly life could change when those little compromises began stacking on top of each other.

In 2010, Jenny had no idea where our relationship would eventually take us, and neither did I. She had met a bloke working towards his trade, trying to be a good dad, spending half his life in the gym and talking about building a future. She couldn't possibly have known about the addiction, homelessness, broken trust and chaos that would eventually become part of our story.



All she knew was that some persistent d!ckhead she had met on the internet wouldn't give up after she failed to call him following their first date.

Eventually, she gave me another chance.

It certainly wouldn't be the last one she gave me.

And so began thirteen years of sh!t f@ckery.

CHAPTER 21

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING

After completing my apprenticeship as a mechanical fitter and welder, I found local work around Brisbane. Most of the jobs took me back into the water industry, sometimes working in wastewater treatment and other times on the fresh water side. I finally had a trade behind me and was earning reasonable money, but before long the gas boom out west started offering opportunities that were hard to ignore. There was serious money to be made, along with rosters of three weeks on and two weeks off.



To me, the roster sounded perfect. Working locally often meant six days a week, whereas working out west would give me two full weeks at home with my kids and Jenny. At least, that was how I justified it. I could earn considerably more money and still convince myself I was gaining more quality time with the people who mattered to me. What I failed to understand was that being physically home for two weeks meant very little if I wasn't actually present in the ways the people around me needed me to be.

Those two weeks at home also gave my addiction room to grow. I had good money coming in, plenty of time off and very little stopping me from doing whatever I wanted until it was time to fly back to work. Substance use became increasingly tied to my time at home. I would spend my break enjoying that freedom, then suddenly have to pull myself together when it was time to return to camp. The first few days back were usually extremely tough as my body and mind adjusted from two weeks of using into three weeks of long hours, isolation and the strict routine of camp life.

My relationship with Jenny was also deteriorating. She hated me working away, and almost every goodbye seemed to end in an argument. I would leave Brisbane with things unresolved between us, then arrive back at camp already struggling physically while the silence between us played havoc with my mind. Instead of listening to what Jenny was trying to tell me, I kept convincing myself that earning good money made the sacrifice worthwhile. I thought I knew what was best for us, even when the person I was supposed to be building a life with was telling me otherwise.

Working away could be incredibly isolating. You could be surrounded by hundreds of people and still feel completely alone. Everyone had a life happening somewhere else, with partners, children, problems and responsibilities continuing while we were hundreds of kilometres away. During my time out west, there were workmates who tragically took their own lives. It was confronting and something that stayed with me. These were people with good jobs and good incomes, yet money couldn't protect them from whatever battles they were fighting inside themselves. Sometimes money isn't

everything, although it would take me a long time to truly understand that.

For around a year and a half, I continued living that life. Then, just after Christmas, I flew back to camp expecting another normal three week stint. Almost as soon as I arrived, I walked straight into a mandatory substance test. I knew there was a very good chance I was going to fail, and sure enough, I did. Almost as quickly as I had arrived, I was put back on a plane and sent home.

Surprisingly, I didn't lose my job. I was given two weeks to provide a clean urine test, after which I would be allowed to return. Looking back, that should have been an enormous warning sign. My addiction had now followed me into my employment and put a well paying career at risk. But addiction has an incredible ability to distort your thinking. Instead of deciding that I needed to stop using, the lesson I took from the experience was that next time I needed to allow myself a couple more days off the gear before returning to work.

That was how I thought back then.

When I arrived home, I lied to Jenny about why I had been sent back. She knew me far too well to believe everything I told her, and it didn't take much for her to put two and two together. She was less than impressed. Once I had produced a clean test, it was time to leave again. Jenny drove me to the airport, and once again we argued. She was absolutely pissed with me. I boarded the plane expecting the usual silence for a while, believing that eventually things would settle down as they had before.

This time, they didn't.

The days passed and I heard nothing from Jenny. Then a week went by, followed by another. Her phone number changed and every attempt I made to contact her went nowhere. For the entire three weeks I was away, there was silence. I knew she was angry, but I still hadn't grasped just how far I had pushed her. Part of me probably believed that when I got home we would argue, talk things through and eventually carry on as we had so many times before.

When my rotation finally finished, I returned to Brisbane and went home. I put my key into the door of our unit, unlocked it and walked inside, only to find another family living there. For a moment, I couldn't comprehend what I was seeing. I had returned to the place I still considered home, but it wasn't my home anymore.

Jenny had gone.

She had moved house, changed her phone number and cut all contact with me. There had been no final conversation and no opportunity for me to make another promise about changing. She had heard enough words from me. My inability to listen to what she needed had finally become too much, and she had decided the only way forward was to make a clean break.

I was devastated. I had spent so much time telling myself that I was working away for the people I loved that I hadn't noticed what it was costing me. I had convinced myself that earning more money meant I was providing a better life, but Jenny hadn't been asking me for a bigger pay packet. She wanted me home. She wanted me to listen. She wanted a partner who was actually part of the relationship rather than someone who kept deciding what was best for both of us.

Standing there and realising she had disappeared from my life forced me to face something I didn't want to admit. I had put money first while telling myself I was putting my family first. I thought I was building something for our future, but in the process I had damaged what we already had. By the time I finally understood how serious Jenny had been, she wasn't there anymore to tell me.

In my mind, I had put the final nail in the coffin of our relationship.

I didn't know how to deal with losing her, and by that stage of my life I had become very good at avoiding emotions I didn't want to feel. Substance use had become more than something I did for enjoyment. It had become a way of dealing with pain. Hurt, anger, loneliness, rejection and shame could all be pushed aside for a while if I used enough to numb myself. It never fixed anything, but at that point I wasn't interested in fixing the problem. I just didn't want to feel it.

With nowhere to live, I contacted a mate who had a spare room and agreed to rent it from him. He also happened to be someone I regularly got product from. At the time, I considered myself lucky. I had somewhere to sleep and a roof over my head at a time when everything else seemed to have fallen apart. What I didn't recognise was how dangerous that situation was for someone whose substance use was already becoming increasingly difficult to control.

Jenny was gone, but at least I had found somewhere to live. More importantly to the person I was at that time, I also had an easy way of dealing with the pain whenever I was home. I didn't have to sit alone and think about what I had lost or accept my part in losing it. I could numb myself and pretend for a few hours that none of it mattered.

Of course, it did matter.

I had chased the money believing it would help me build a better life, only to return home and discover that one of the most important parts of that life had disappeared while I was away. Instead of stopping and asking myself where things had gone wrong, I buried the hurt and carried on.

At the time, getting numb felt easier than facing reality.

I had no idea just how much that decision was eventually going to cost me

CHAPTER 22

THE PURPLE CIRCLE

After losing Jenny from my life and learning a pretty big lesson from my time working out west, I decided I'd had enough. I threw in the job and returned to Brisbane. Working away had given me good money and plenty of experience, but I was tired of spending huge chunks of my life away from my boys, living out of bags and counting down the days until I could get home again. I wanted to be present in their lives and have a job where I could actually go home at the end of the day.

It didn't take long before I found work with a great company carrying out maintenance on Brisbane's enormous fresh-water pipeline network. There were around 700 kilometres of pipes beneath Brisbane, much of it ageing infrastructure that most people would never see or think about. You turned on a tap and clean water came out. Behind that everyday action was an entire world of pipes, valves, reservoirs, pumps and equipment that needed constant maintenance.

A lot of my work involved confined spaces. I would be harnessed up and sent down deep manholes to repair valves, replace rusted bolts and maintain infrastructure that had sometimes been sitting beneath Brisbane for decades. It could be wet, filthy and bloody uncomfortable. Confined-space work came with serious risks, so atmospheric testing, ventilation, communication, harnesses and rescue procedures were all part of the job.

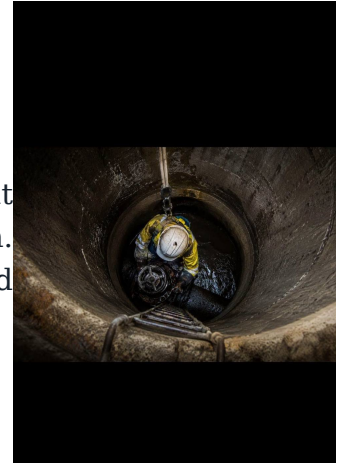
Strangely enough, I loved it. There was something satisfying about disappearing underground knowing there was a problem and eventually climbing back out knowing I had fixed it. More importantly, the company appreciated me. They respected me, listened when I had something to say and valued what I could do.

Unfortunately, they eventually lost the contract.

If I wanted to continue doing the work I had come to enjoy, I had little choice but to move across to the much larger company that had taken over. That company subcontracted into one of the major players in Brisbane's water industry, and for roughly the next five years I worked across some incredible infrastructure while experiencing what, from my perspective, was a bloody toxic workplace culture.

Bullying and favouritism were rife. There was what we jokingly referred to as the "purple circle." If you were inside it, things seemed to go your way. If you weren't, you could expect the jobs nobody else wanted.

I definitely wasn't in the purple circle.



I regularly felt like I was being handed the shit jobs and menial tasks everyone else managed to avoid. Maybe some of that was perception. By then I had developed a bit of a chip on my shoulder, and I can admit that now. But at the time, I genuinely felt singled out and undervalued.

The culture felt like something left over from the 1980s. It slowly improved during my years there, but the environment still took its toll on my confidence and mental health. I became resentful and increasingly disengaged. I probably should have left, but there were plenty of reasons to stay.

The job was local, which meant far more time with my boys. I had a company ute, tools, a great hourly rate and plenty of overtime. I travelled all over Brisbane, moving between different sites without having to disappear interstate for months at a time. Financially, I was doing well, and technically the work itself was bloody interesting.

I worked across dams, water filtration plants, chemical dosing systems, pumps, valves, pipework, reservoirs and the wider water network. Some days involved maintaining equipment that had been operating for decades; others involved installing new equipment or solving breakdowns. There was always something different to do, and I loved the variety.

My workmates were fantastic blokes too. We laughed, gave each other shit, worked hard and looked after one another. If it hadn't been for my issues with management, it probably would have been the perfect job for me.

But I won't pretend I was some innocent victim in all of this. I wasn't the perfect employee.

As my resentment towards the workplace grew, my reliability started going downhill. There were mornings when I knew what job had been put aside for me and I just couldn't face going in. I would call in sick rather than deal with management or another day feeling like I was being deliberately given work nobody else wanted.

At the time, I blamed the workplace culture for a lot of it. Looking back, that was only part of the story.

The other part was me.

And addiction.

By this stage my drug use was no longer something I could genuinely describe as recreational. Daily use had become normal, and sometimes it was twice a day. The frightening thing was that I could still function well enough to convince myself I didn't have a serious problem.

I had a skilled job, earned good money, drove a company ute, paid my bills and had my boys in my life. I could walk onto major infrastructure sites carrying responsibility, and from the outside there was little to suggest what was happening underneath it all.

That became one of the greatest lies I ever told myself.

I thought because I was functioning, I was in control.

I wasn't.

While my addiction was growing, Jenny and I continued our painful cycle of finding each other, losing each other and somehow finding our way back again.

Jenny had tried to escape my world of lies, deceit and broken promises, and she had every reason to. Yet somehow I would find my way back into her life with another promise.

I'll change. I'll stop. I'll get clean. This time will be different.

The hardest thing to explain is that when I said those things, I often meant every word. I wasn't always deliberately lying to her. In those moments, I genuinely believed I was going to change. I could picture the man I wanted to become and convince myself that tomorrow would be different.

But promises mean nothing when you keep breaking them.

Jenny didn't need me to keep telling her I loved her. She needed me to prove it.

And I kept failing.

Our relationship became a revolving door. I would move in, things would be good for a while, then the cracks would appear and eventually everything would fall apart. Sometimes we were separated for six months, sometimes a year or even longer. She would try to rebuild her life and meet other people, and I would do the same.

I met other women during those years, many of them genuinely good people. Sometimes they ended the relationship; other times I walked away. There were occasions when guilt played a part because I knew what I was hiding and the chaos I was capable of bringing into somebody else's life.

But there was another truth.

None of them were Jenny.

I thought meeting somebody else might eventually make those feelings disappear, but it never happened. No matter how far apart our lives became, part of me always went back to her. As heartless, soulless and broken as I sometimes felt I had become, there was something about Jenny that could still reach a part of me nobody else could.

Eventually, somehow, we found ourselves in each other's lives again.

We rented a place together in Petrie. It had a garage where I could work on my cars, a yard for my boys and enough room for us to try building a proper life together. I could

work locally, come home at night, spend time with my children and have Jenny beside me.

On paper, I had everything I kept saying I wanted.

A good job, good money, my boys close, a home and Jenny.

Yet I continued taking her for granted.

That is difficult to admit because I can see it so clearly now. Jenny loved me, and instead of protecting that love, I treated it like a safety net. Somewhere inside me, I think I believed she would always forgive me because she had forgiven me before.

She wanted me to become the man she knew I could be. I kept telling her that man was coming, while giving her more bullcrap and empty words.

Eventually, Jenny had enough.

She moved out.

This time I reacted terribly. I was angry, hurt, obsessive and unable to accept that my own behaviour had brought us back to exactly the same place. Instead of accepting responsibility and allowing her to leave with dignity, I reacted from a place of desperation and anger.

I said things I regret. I did things I regret. There are parts of that period I'm deeply ashamed of and details that don't need to be dragged back into the light. What matters is that Jenny had reached her limit, and instead of respecting that, I made an already painful situation worse.

We parted in probably the worst way we possibly could have.

Once again, I had let her down.

When the anger faded, I wanted to make amends. I wanted to apologise, explain myself and somehow convince her there was still something worth saving.

Jenny wasn't having a bar of it.

Authorities became involved and court orders were put in place. Whatever I wanted no longer mattered. I had to stay away. For someone who had spent years believing he could somehow talk his way back into Jenny's life, that was incredibly difficult to accept.

But I had created the situation.

There was nobody else to blame.

I remained in the Petrie house for around another nine months after Jenny left. The place that had once represented a fresh start became a constant reminder of what I

had lost. The garage was still there, the yard was still there and my possessions were still there, but the future I had pictured when we moved in had disappeared.

I tried dating again. I tried telling myself there were other women and another life waiting for me somewhere.

But I compared everyone to Jenny.

Nobody stood a chance.

Looking back, that wasn't fair on them either. They weren't inferior people. The problem was that I was trying to use other people to fill a hole inside me that I had helped create.

Eventually, I knew I needed to get out of that house. Apart from the memories, I needed somewhere more affordable, but whatever came next also had to allow me to have my boys stay regularly. I needed somewhere they could spend weekends with me and still feel like they had a home with Dad.

Renting another normal house didn't feel like the answer.

So I started looking at other options.

One idea kept coming back to me. The more I thought about it, the more sense it seemed to make. It could give me somewhere to live, room for my boys and dramatically reduce my living costs.

I thought changing my surroundings might finally give me the fresh start I desperately needed.

What I didn't understand yet was that wherever I went, I was taking the real problem with me.

But at the time, I thought I had come up with the answer.

I was about to make a fairly drastic decision.

And that decision would eventually take my life somewhere I could never have imagined.

CHAPTER 23

BUSTED

My housing situation was something I needed to address once again. I was renting a three-bedroom house by myself, and financially it was slowly draining me. I was earning reasonable money and working hard, but so much of what I earned disappeared into keeping a roof over my head. Around me, some of my workmates were talking about buying properties, mortgages and getting themselves onto the housing ladder. Strangely enough, I was thinking in completely the opposite direction.



When I told them what I was planning, most of them thought I was crazy. Some laughed because they genuinely didn't believe I was serious. The truth was, I had already made up my mind.

I sold my beloved SS Commodore, sold most of my possessions and started hunting around for another bus. I had done the bus thing before back in New Zealand, but this time I wanted to do it properly. I wasn't interested in something small or temporary. If I was going to make a bus my home again, I wanted something big. Eventually, I found exactly what I was looking for in Sydney: a forty-foot Hino RG coach that had recently come out of service.

I flew down to Sydney, looked it over and bought it on the spot. There weren't months of careful planning or some beautifully prepared blueprint for alternative living. I had decided this was going to become my home, and once my mind was made up, there wasn't much that was going to change it.

Then I had to drive the thing back to Brisbane.

I held an MR licence, but I had never driven anything remotely like this before. Sitting behind the wheel of a forty-foot coach in Sydney traffic was a very quick introduction to just how enormous my new home actually was. Every corner suddenly looked too tight, every lane felt too narrow, and every car seemed determined to sit exactly where I couldn't see it. Once I finally escaped Sydney and reached the open road, I started to relax. The old girl drove beautifully, and I pointed her north and drove virtually non-stop back to Brisbane.

The day I arrived back, I moved in.

Calling it a motorhome at that point would have been extremely generous. It was still basically a passenger bus. For the first couple of nights, I slept stretched across the back seat. Within days I had the passenger seats removed, and within about a week I managed to get it registered as a motorhome. Legally, I now had a motorhome. In

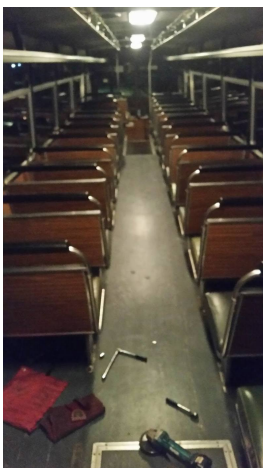
reality, I had a forty-foot empty shell with somewhere to lie down.

For the next four years, that bus would consume thousands of hours of my life. Almost every spare evening went into building it. I didn't have a workshop or a shed where I could park it for six months and slowly complete the conversion. I was living inside the project while I was building it, and to make things even more interesting, it was also my main mode of transport.

Every morning, I would drive my forty-foot home to work. Every afternoon, I would finish work, climb back behind the wheel and decide where home was going to be that night. I had around thirteen different places that I rotated through. Some were industrial areas, while others were quiet back roads or dark stretches of country road where nobody was likely to bother me. I would arrive in the evening, try not to attract too much attention and make sure I was gone again by around five o'clock the following morning. I learnt quickly that if I stayed in one place too often, eventually somebody would notice.



Most of the time I had no real dramas, but sleeping in isolated places came with its own risks. Every now and then, a car would turn up at two in the morning. People would do burnouts nearby, yell things out, harass me or throw objects at the bus. I never really knew who was outside or what their intentions were, and getting out to investigate wasn't always the smartest option.

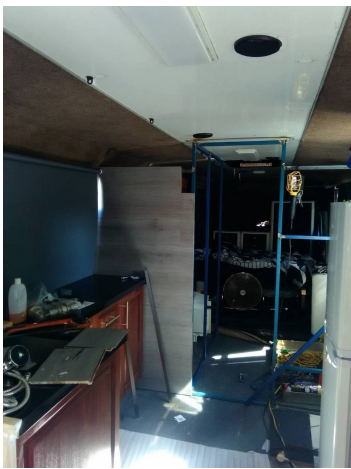
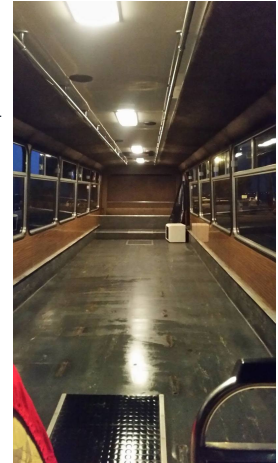


Eventually, I installed a four-camera security system around the bus. I had a monitor beside the driver's seat and another one near my bed so I could see what was happening outside without opening the door. The bus also had escape hatches through the roof and another way out through the floor. I kept a large steel bar beside my bed, just in case I ever genuinely needed to protect myself. Fortunately, despite the occasional late-night idiot, most nights passed without any serious problems.

It was a strange way to live. I could be asleep in bed at two in the morning, hear a noise outside and reach over to check the security cameras before deciding whether it was anything worth worrying about. Then, a few hours later, I would start the engine and drive my entire house to work as though nothing unusual had happened.

At night, I would fire up the generator, set up my lights and start working on the bus. Sometimes I would work until midnight, sometimes until one or two in the morning, and occasionally I would work right through the night because whatever I had pulled apart needed to be back together before five o'clock so I could drive to work. I would pack everything away, clean myself up as best I could and head off to my normal job as though I had spent the night in a normal house.

Nobody seeing me during the day would necessarily have known what my nights looked like.

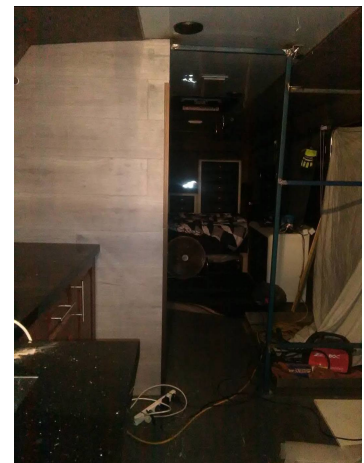


The first priorities weren't fancy. They were basic human necessities. I needed running water, somewhere to go to the toilet, electricity and the ability to cook and wash myself. Slowly, piece by piece, I began building everything I needed.

Water tanks went underneath, followed by pumps and plumbing. Then came solar panels, batteries and a built-in generator. Over time, I installed air-conditioning, a kitchen, microwave, fridge, BBQ, washing machine and clothesline. I built storage underneath the bus, added a motorcycle rack and even created under-bus storage for a kayak. Every new addition made life a little easier and brought the old coach another step closer to becoming the home I had pictured in my head.

I called her Busted.

The name suited her. Looking back, it probably suited me as well.





People would sometimes refer to me as homeless. Technically, I guess I was. I didn't have a fixed residential address in the traditional sense. I didn't own land, rent a house or have a permanent place where I was legally entitled to park every night. At the end of every working day, I had to find somewhere I could quietly park my home without causing problems or attracting unwanted attention.

I didn't see myself as homeless, though. As far as I was concerned, I had a mobile home that belonged to me. Nobody could increase the rent. No landlord could tell me I had to leave because they wanted to sell the property. If I

didn't like where I was, I could turn the key, start the engine and take my entire house somewhere else.

There was something incredibly freeing about that, but there was another side to it as well.

Driving forty feet of bus everywhere is not particularly convenient. A quick trip to the shops required planning, and parking wasn't something you could take for granted. Fuel wasn't cheap, registration wasn't cheap, insurance wasn't cheap, and maintenance on a commercial-sized vehicle could quickly empty your wallet. Every repair seemed bigger, heavier and more expensive than the equivalent job on a normal vehicle.



Then there was the loneliness.

That was probably the part I didn't talk about.

During the week, after work was finished and the tools were eventually packed away, it was often just me sitting inside this enormous bus parked somewhere in the darkness. There were no neighbours I knew, nobody waiting inside for me and no familiar street outside the window. Some nights there wasn't another person anywhere nearby.



There was just me and Busted.

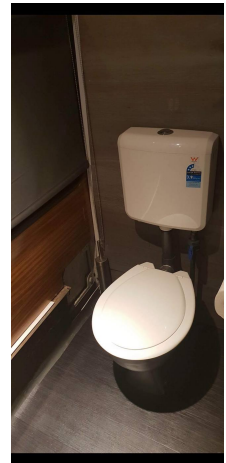


Sometimes I would park at Pelican Park. At one stage there were hot showers available there, which made it a particularly useful place for someone living the way I was. It was also there that I began noticing other people arriving late in the evening and settling in for the night.

Some were sleeping in cars.

Some were families.

I would watch a car pull up and realise that everyone inside was going to spend the night in it. Parents and children would somehow make themselves fit among their belongings and try to get some sleep. Meanwhile, I was sitting nearby with forty feet of space to myself.





I remember feeling guilty about that.

I knew my own living situation wasn't conventional, but I had room. I had a bed. I had power, water and eventually a kitchen, toilet, shower and most of the things found inside a small home. Just metres away, an entire family might be trying to sleep inside a car.

At the time, I didn't understand homelessness in the way I do today. I certainly couldn't have imagined where my own life was eventually heading or that years later I would spend so much of my life meeting families living in cars, tents and makeshift camps. Back then, they were just people I happened to notice while I was living my own unusual life.



But I noticed them.



And I remember how uncomfortable it made me feel.

The weekends were different. The weekends were what made so much of it worthwhile.

I would pull up outside where my boys were staying, open the door and ask them the same question.

"Where are we off to this weekend?"





Suddenly, the thing that made my weekday life difficult became one of the greatest adventure vehicles a father could ask for. We would head down to the Gold Coast and Wet'n'Wild, which conveniently had coach parking. We would head north to the Sunshine Coast, out towards the Glass House

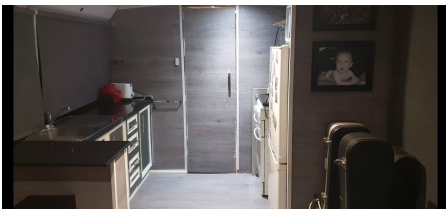
Mountains, across to Bribie, or wherever else sounded good at the time.

There didn't always need to be a plan. That was part of the beauty of it.

We had beds, food, water and power. Eventually, we had nearly everything we needed right there with us. We could point Busted in a direction and go. Every weekend could become a new adventure, and some of my happiest memories from those years were made inside that bus with my boys. For them, Dad arriving in a huge coach probably felt exciting. For me, those weekends gave me something to look forward to during weeks that were becoming increasingly difficult.



For much of that period, I was single. Surprisingly, the bus didn't seem to hurt my dating prospects as much as you might imagine. Some women actually liked the bohemian, free-living lifestyle that came with it. I would joke that I owned my own home, and technically I wasn't lying.

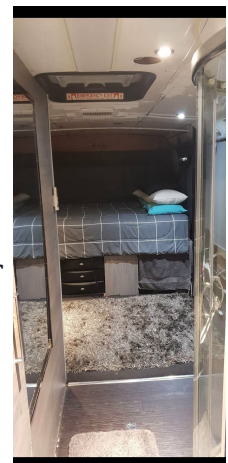


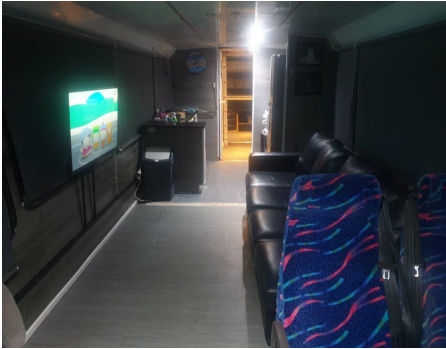
The part I didn't joke about was why I was really living the way I was.

Behind the solar panels, water tanks, weekend adventures and humour, my addiction was continuing to grow. I was still functioning, still working and still managing to keep most parts of my life moving, but I was becoming increasingly good at hiding how badly things were beginning to unravel inside me.

From the outside, I could make my life sound almost enviable. I had no rent, no mortgage and no landlord. I had a job, a huge motorhome, the freedom to travel and weekends exploring with my kids. There were genuinely good parts to that life, and I don't want to rewrite history by pretending there weren't.

However, freedom and isolation can sometimes look remarkably similar from the outside.





During this period, I became increasingly withdrawn from my family. I stopped turning up to things and began avoiding family events. I didn't want my brothers or sisters looking too closely at me because I was frightened they might see what I was desperately trying to hide. I didn't want them knowing how deeply addiction was beginning to get its hooks into me or how much shame I was carrying underneath everything else.

Shame can make you do strange things. Instead of reaching towards the people who love you, it can make you pull away from them. Instead of asking for help, you learn how to hide. Eventually, you become so good at hiding that the people around you may not realise how much trouble you are actually in.

The bus made disappearing incredibly easy.

If I didn't want to see anyone, I didn't have to. I could drive down some forgotten country road, pull over, close the curtains and disappear for the night. Nobody knew exactly where I was, nobody could see what I was doing, and by five the next morning I would be gone.



There was one conversation with my sister that I have never forgotten. She asked me where I was staying, and I told her I was parked down the end of a country road somewhere.

She sounded concerned and asked, "Aren't you worried about the weirdos that go down there at night?"

I replied, "I am the weirdo that's down there at night."

She laughed, and I laughed too.



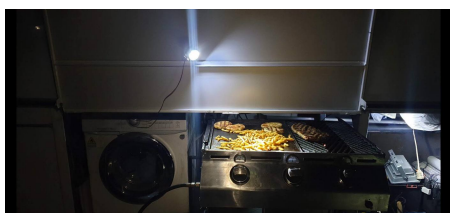


It was funny, but underneath the joke was a truth I didn't really want to acknowledge.

There I was, alone in a forty-foot bus at the end of some dark country road, working a full-time job, battling an addiction nobody fully understood, distancing myself from the people who loved me and pretending everything was exactly how I wanted it.

The strange thing is that part of it genuinely was.

That's what makes this period of my life difficult to explain. Busted wasn't some miserable prison that I hated living in. I loved that bus. I loved building it with my own hands. I loved the freedom it gave me, and I loved waking up somewhere different. Most of all, I loved the adventures it gave me with my boys. Some of those memories remain incredibly precious to me.



At the same time, Busted was becoming my hiding place.

Every improvement I made to the bus made it easier to live outside what most people considered a normal life. The better I made it, the less reason I had to

return to conventional housing. The more isolated I became, the easier it was to hide what was happening to me.

I had walked away from a housing situation I couldn't afford and built myself something that, on the surface, solved the problem. What I didn't understand at the time was that some problems couldn't be fixed with solar panels, batteries, water tanks and a generator.



I could build plumbing. I could wire electrical systems, fabricate storage and install a kitchen. I could take an empty forty-foot coach and, with enough determination and sleepless nights, turn it into a fully functioning home with my own hands.



What I couldn't seem to rebuild was myself.

Looking back now, I can see a man desperately trying to remain functional. I worked, paid my bills, maintained my vehicle and loved my children. I took my boys on adventures, laughed, joked and continued convincing the people around me that I was doing alright.

There was still plenty of good in my life. There was still laughter, adventure, love and a future that I could have reached for.

But underneath it all, addiction was tightening its grip.

I didn't know it yet, but the bus I had built to give myself freedom would carry me through some increasingly dark chapters of my life.

Her name was Busted.

At the time, I thought I had named the bus.

Looking back, perhaps I was describing myself.

CHAPTER 24

VIETNAM 2018

During my time living in the bus, I decided to take a trip to Vietnam. I had travelled to Thailand twice before, and both trips had certainly given me stories to tell.

The first time I visited Thailand, I came across a physical domestic altercation involving a local couple. I tried to intervene and break it up and ended up being st@bb#d twice, once in the head and once in the back. I needed stitches, but thankfully neither wound caused any serious or lasting damage.



On my second trip to Thailand, I ended up being dr%gg#d and robbed. Despite those experiences, I still loved travelling through Southeast Asia, so this time I decided to try somewhere different.

Vietnam.

Looking back, this trip probably demonstrates better than almost anything else just how powerful the pull of m#th@mphetam!ne had become. Before I had even left Australia, one of my biggest concerns was how I was going to deal with coming down while I was overseas. I knew what the crash could be like. The exhaustion, depression and overwhelming desire to sleep were something I desperately wanted to avoid. Instead of recognising that fear as a sign of how dependent I had become, I started thinking about how I could make sure it didn't happen.



I had pre-ordered a "ball" of m#th@mphetam!ne, and I made the incredibly stupid decision to take it with me. This wasn't a case of not understanding the consequences. I knew Vietnam had extremely severe dr%g laws. I understood that serious dr%g offences could result in extraordinarily long prison sentences and, in some circumstances, the death penalty. I had actually thought about what could happen to me and still decided the risk was worth taking. That is probably the part that frightens me most when I look back.



At the airport in Australia, I was tense and terrified. I knew what I was doing and knew how badly it could end. Every part of me should have been screaming at me to stop, but fear wasn't enough to overcome the addiction. I won't describe exactly how I attempted to get the m#th@mphetam!ne through the airport, because there is nothing clever or admirable about smuggling dr%gs across an international border. What matters is that I got onto that plane knowing I was gambling with my freedom.

Arriving in Vietnam was even worse. Walking through the airport towards immigration and customs, I was painfully aware of what I had done. The officials looked incredibly serious, and some were carrying machine guns. This wasn't Australia. I was in a foreign country with extremely harsh dr%g laws, surrounded by armed officials, knowing exactly what I had brought in with me. I was tense and terrified. I watched every official I passed, wondering if they were looking at me, if they somehow knew, or if I was about to be pulled aside. My heart was racing, and I remember thinking about just how badly this could end. I knew the consequences could be enormous, yet none of that fear had been enough to stop me taking the risk in the first place.

Eventually, I made it through the airport and walked outside. The relief was enormous. At the time, I probably saw getting through as a victory. Looking back now, there was nothing victorious about it. Standing in that airport surrounded by armed officials should have been enough to make me realise just how far addiction had distorted my judgement. Instead, I was just relieved that I had gotten away with it.

Once I was in Vietnam, I was surprised by how accessible substances appeared to be in some of the places I visited. From what I personally witnessed, m#th@mphetam!ne seemed frighteningly easy to find. It challenged some of my assumptions about Australia's dr%g problems and showed me that addiction certainly wasn't confined to one country.





Outside of that, Vietnam was incredible. To this day, it remains one of the best countries I have ever had the privilege of visiting. I loved the people, the food, the countryside, the noise and chaos of the cities, and the feeling that there was something completely different around every corner. But one experience stood above everything else.

I went on a three-day motorcycle trek through the Vietnamese countryside with a local guide whose name, believe it or not, was Phuck. It was just the two of us on motorcycles, heading away from the usual tourist areas

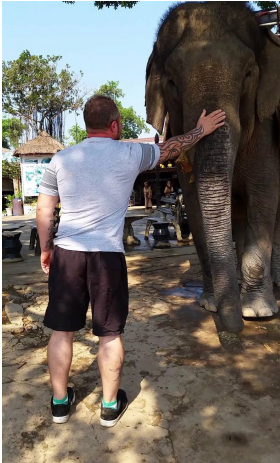
and into places I never would have discovered on my own. Those three days became the highlight of my entire trip.

Phuck took me well off the beaten track, through small towns, villages and rural communities where I was able to spend time with local people rather than experiencing Vietnam from behind the window of a tour bus. I remember being out in the rice fields with elderly Vietnamese women, joining them as they cut rice by hand. I probably wasn't much help, but being welcomed into their world, even briefly, was something I'll never forget.

We rode through countryside that seemed to change constantly, passing rice fields, lakes, villages and landscapes unlike anything I was used to seeing back home. At one point I rode an elephant through a lake, another experience that felt completely surreal. There were moments during those three days when I would look around and think about how far away from ordinary life I was.



There was also plenty of stupidity. While riding through one rural town, I decided it would be a great idea to pull a wheelie. The local police disagreed. I was pulled over, and suddenly Phuck became more than just my motorcycle guide. He became my negotiator. I stood there while he spoke rapidly with the police, having absolutely no idea what was being said or what was about to happen. Somehow, after a bit of sweet talking, Phuck managed to get me out of the ticket. We climbed back onto the bikes and continued on our way.



That three-day trek showed me a side of Vietnam I would never have experienced otherwise. It wasn't the hotels or tourist attractions that stayed with me most. It was sitting with ordinary people, riding through remote communities, cutting rice with women in the fields and seeing the country through the eyes of someone who actually lived there. The Vietnamese people left the strongest impression on me. I found them warm, welcoming and incredibly resilient. I was only a visitor passing through their country for three weeks, but there were moments of kindness and hospitality that have remained with me ever since.

There was also a much darker part of Vietnam's history that was impossible to ignore. The repercussions of the Vietnam War were still visible decades later, particularly the effects associated with Agent Orange. Seeing some of those consequences in person was very different from reading about them in a book or watching them on television. History didn't feel distant when you could see that people were still living with its effects.

There was an uncomfortable contradiction in the entire trip that I couldn't see clearly at the time. I was travelling through an extraordinary country, meeting beautiful people and having experiences that I would remember for the rest of my life. Yet hanging over all of it was the fact that I had been willing to risk my freedom just to make sure m#th@mphetam!ne came along for the holiday.



That is one of the deceptive things about addiction. Life doesn't necessarily become terrible overnight. You can still laugh. You can travel. You can have incredible adventures and create some of the best memories of your life. Meanwhile, addiction can be quietly tightening its grip in the background. For me, the warning sign couldn't have been much clearer. I couldn't imagine spending three weeks overseas without m#th@mphetam!ne.



After three weeks, it was time to leave. I boarded the flight home with some of the best memories I had ever made overseas. Vietnam had been everything I hoped it would be, and I knew I would never forget the country, particularly those three days riding through the countryside with Phuck.

What I didn't properly appreciate was what the trip had exposed about me. I had been prepared to risk consequences that could have changed my life forever, not because I was chasing some great adventure, but because I was terrified of coming down. At the time, I didn't

dwell on that for very long.

I had made it through. Another ridiculous risk taken. Another consequence avoided. And after three unforgettable weeks in Vietnam, it was time to return to Australia and climb back into my bus.

CHAPTER 25

MEDICAL INCAPACITY

Back from Vietnam, it was back to the bus and back to work. By this point, I had been with the water company for around five years and living in my bus for roughly two. Vietnam had been an incredible escape, but when I returned, so did something I had been trying to ignore for quite some time.

My hands were failing me.

It started gradually, with pins and needles, tingling and numbness. Sometimes my hands would turn red, while other times they would become almost white. Initially, the symptoms came and went, but eventually they became more constant. I would wake during the night with completely numb hands and have to shake them and move my fingers just to get some feeling back.

I went backwards and forwards to doctors trying to find the cause. I had multiple tests and scans of my neck, back and clavicle before eventually undergoing nerve conductivity testing on my wrists. Finally, I had an answer.

Severe carpal tunnel syndrome.

Considering the work I had done for years, it wasn't difficult to understand how my wrists had taken such a beating. Turning stubborn valves, gripping spanners, pulling on tools and repetitive heavy fitting work had been part of my everyday life.

By the time I was diagnosed, it was affecting almost everything I did. Working with tools became dangerous because I couldn't always feel how tightly I was gripping something. Motorcycles had always been one of my greatest escapes, but riding became difficult. Playing guitar, lifting weights and even ordinary activities were becoming frustrating.

These weren't just hobbies to me. They were parts of who I was, and slowly they were being taken away.

WorkCover accepted the initial claim, and I underwent surgery on both wrists. The relief was almost immediate. After living with constant tingling and numbness, being able to properly feel my hands again was incredible. I genuinely believed the problem had been fixed.

Unfortunately, it hadn't.



Before long, the symptoms returned. I raised the problem with work, expecting that because it was essentially the same condition, there would be some understanding. This time, the response was very different. My workplace wasn't nearly as supportive, and neither was WorkCover.

Eventually, I was let go because of "medical incapacity."

Two words ended a career I had spent years building.

I had started an adult apprenticeship later than most and worked hard to prove myself. I had travelled around Australia, worked in water and sewage treatment plants, climbed into confined spaces and worked in environments most people would never want to enter. I had developed skills I was proud of. I knew how to pull machinery apart, diagnose problems and put things back together again.

Being a mechanical fitter had become part of my identity.

I also felt betrayed. I believed my workplace actively worked against my second WorkCover claim. As I have mentioned previously, I had experienced bullying and the "purple circle" mentality within that workplace. Certain people seemed protected and favoured, while others weren't. I had worked in plenty of rough environments with difficult personalities throughout my career, but nothing compared with the toxicity I experienced there.

The next couple of years became an exhausting cycle of appointments, specialists, testing and waiting through the public health system. Eventually, the testing confirmed severe carpal tunnel syndrome again. The original operations had not solved the problem.

I underwent further procedures, including what was described to me as extended carpal tunnel surgery, with a protective fat flap placed around the nerve. By the time the entire ordeal was finished, I had undergone five operations.

For almost a year during this period, I had no income. Because of my New Zealand citizenship status at the time, I wasn't eligible for the government benefits I needed. Thankfully, I had permanent disability insurance, and eventually I received a payout.

I was also incredibly grateful for my bus. Without it, there is little doubt in my mind that I could have ended up living in a tent. It wasn't a conventional home, but during one of the most uncertain periods of my life, those four walls protected me.

My career as a mechanical fitter was over, and my wrists would never return to what they once were. Even today, motorcycles, guitar, lifting weights and other activities



can still aggravate them.

Back then, I didn't handle that reality well.

For most of my adult life, I had been someone who worked with his hands. I fixed things, built things and solved problems. There was pride in knowing I could walk into a difficult situation and figure out what needed to be done.

Suddenly, I didn't know what I was supposed to do next.

That loss of purpose affected me more deeply than I admitted at the time. I became depressed, isolated, frustrated and bitter. I spent far too much time alone in the bus, thinking about what had happened and wondering what my future was going to look like.

When I didn't want to think anymore, I already knew how to switch my brain off.

Substances.

During this period, my addiction reached a completely different level. My use went from once or twice a day to around eight points a day at its worst. I was using throughout the day, every day, and my tolerance had become so high that it took increasingly larger amounts to achieve the effect I wanted.

By then, I wasn't chasing a good time.



I was chasing numbness.

I wanted to escape the feelings of failure, anger and uncertainty. But substances don't remove those feelings. They postpone them while quietly creating more problems around you.

My world became smaller. I withdrew from much of my family, although my children were different. Whatever condition I was in, I always did my best to maintain time with them. I wasn't always the father I wish I had been during those years, but I loved my children deeply, and being their dad was something I desperately tried to hold

onto.

When I did feel sociable, I often surrounded myself with the wrong people. Relationships came and went, and I sabotaged many of them through addiction, selfishness and destructive behaviour.

The best way I can describe myself during this period is a cyclone. I was standing in the middle while everyone around me was being hit by the debris.

People who cared about me were hurt. Relationships were damaged and trust disappeared. I created chaos and often convinced myself everyone else was the problem. The painful truth is that sometimes I didn't care about the impact I was having.

Everything became about what I wanted, how I felt and what I needed at that particular moment.

Stuff everyone else.

Looking back now, that's difficult to admit. Depression, addiction and what happened with my career help explain how I reached that point, but they don't excuse the damage I caused. There were good people around me who didn't deserve the version of me they received.

For years, I had been able to pull apart broken machinery, find the problem and work out how to repair it. That was something I understood.

I didn't understand how to do the same thing with myself.

I had lost a career I was proud of, much of the physical ability I had taken for granted, and the direction I thought my life was heading.

Underneath the anger and addiction was something I didn't know how to admit at the time.

I was scared.

Scared of the future. Scared that the best thing I had ever become had been taken away from me. Scared that without my trade, I didn't know who I was anymore.

So, instead of facing those feelings, I numbed them.

I knew how to fix broken machinery.

I had no idea how to fix a broken life.



CHAPTER 26

MY SURPRISE CHILD

During my period of medical incapacity in 2020, I was running amok. Without work giving me structure or purpose, I had even more time to disappear into the chaos I had created around myself. I was doing whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and with whoever I chose. Addiction was still controlling a huge part of my life, and consequences were usually something I worried about after they arrived.

During this time, I had a friend with whom I occasionally had casual encounters. There was never a proper relationship between us, and eventually we went our separate ways, largely because she was struggling with significant addiction issues of her own. Months passed without us seeing each other. Life moved on, or at least I thought it had.

Then one day I was scrolling through Facebook and came across a post she had made. She was asking for recommendations for a suitable daycare for her two-year-old son. I read it again. Two-year-old son? As far as I knew, she didn't have one.

I sent her a message asking, "What two-year-old have you got?"

Her reply immediately made my stomach turn.

"I didn't want you to find out like this."

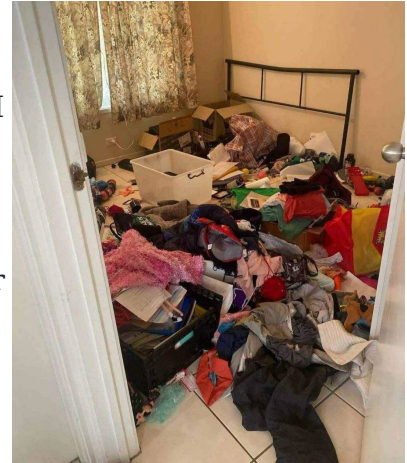
Find out what?

Then a photograph appeared on my phone. I can still remember staring at that little face. For a moment, everything around me disappeared. Looking back at me was a little boy who looked almost identical to photographs of me at the same age. The resemblance was so strong that I almost dropped my phone. I kept staring at the picture, trying to process something my brain hadn't caught up with yet. I knew what she was about to tell me before she even said it.

That little boy could be my son.

I didn't know whether to be angry, devastated, terrified or excited. I think I felt all of it at once. One minute I had been mindlessly scrolling through Facebook. The next I was looking into the face of a child who may have carried my blood for nearly two years without me knowing he existed.

Nearly two years.



That was the part that really hit me. While I had been carrying on with my life, somewhere out there my little boy had been born. Someone had held him for the first time. He had cried, smiled, crawled, learned to stand and eventually taken his first steps. He had started developing his own little personality. He had celebrated birthdays. There had been nights when he was sick, mornings when he woke up smiling and hundreds of ordinary moments that make up the beginning of a child's life.

And I had missed every single one of them. Not because I had chosen to walk away. Because I hadn't known.

Apparently, after we had parted ways, she had discovered she was pregnant. She carried the pregnancy and gave birth without telling me there was a possibility the child was mine. She told me there had been uncertainty about whether she might place him for adoption, and for reasons that belong to her, she had decided not to tell me.

The thought that my son could have been adopted without me ever knowing he existed was incredibly difficult to process. Addiction had made me selfish, unreliable and destructive in many areas of my life, and I make no excuses for that. But being addicted did not mean I didn't love my children. My sons have always occupied a part of me that addiction could never completely destroy. Whatever condition I was in, had I known there was a possibility this little boy was mine, I would have wanted the chance to be his father.

A photograph wasn't proof, though, no matter how much he looked like me. A paternity test was arranged.

Then came the result.

He was mine.

There is something difficult to describe about finding out you have a child who is already nearly two years old. Normally, becoming a father gives you time to prepare, even if you never truly feel ready. You hear about the pregnancy. You watch the belly grow. You wait for the birth. Then suddenly there is this tiny person in your arms and you begin figuring it out from the beginning.

I didn't get any of that. I became his father almost two years late.

There was happiness in discovering him, but there was grief as well. I had gained a son and, at exactly the same moment, learned how much of his life I had already lost. I couldn't go backwards. I couldn't hold him as a newborn. I couldn't hear his first laugh for the first time. I couldn't watch him take his first step. Those moments were gone forever.

All I could control was whether I missed what came next.

As I became involved in his life, my happiness at discovering him quickly became mixed with concern. I began seeing the environment he was living in, and what I saw frightened me.

I won't describe everything. Some parts of this story are extremely painful and deeply personal. More importantly, they are part of my son's story as much as mine. One day, when he is old enough, he can decide what parts of his childhood he wants people to know. I won't make that decision for him.

What I can say is that, from my perspective, the conditions were putrid. I became increasingly concerned about neglect, instability and the environment surrounding this little boy I had only just discovered was mine.

Initially, I tried to help. I cleaned up the mess. I provided money. I paid overdue rent in an attempt to keep a roof over their heads. I tried giving advice and offering practical support. Some of those efforts were interpreted as me trying to control the situation, but I wasn't interested in controlling another adult. I was looking at my son and wondering what would happen to him if nobody stepped in.

At the same time, Jenny and I had started talking again. That meant I had another conversation I desperately didn't want to have. After everything I had already put her through, I had to tell her that while we had been apart, another child had entered my life.

My child.

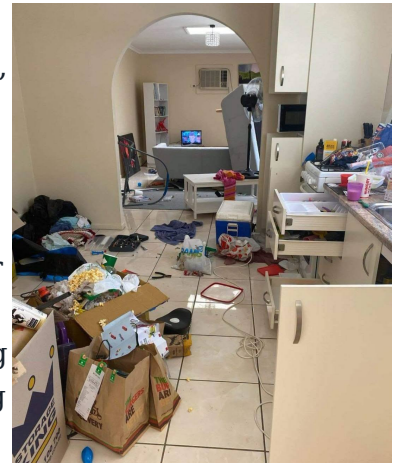
Understandably, Jenny was hurt. Once again, I had brought another consequence of my chaotic behaviour back into her world. She had already endured years of my addiction, lies, selfish decisions and instability. Now, just as we were beginning to communicate again, I arrived carrying another enormous complication.

There was no clever explanation that could make it easier. I had a two-year-old son.

But there was something different about this situation. Standing in the middle of all the adult hurt and dysfunction was a little boy who had done absolutely nothing wrong.

We attempted co-parenting, but it became extremely difficult. There was instability, unreliability and constant uncertainty. I kept trying to help financially, but eventually another call came. His mother had lost her employment again and was facing homelessness. Once again, money was needed to stop everything from collapsing.

By then, I had reached my limit. I wasn't prepared to keep throwing money at a situation that never seemed to become stable. More importantly, my son wasn't going to keep paying the price for decisions being made around him.



I made my position clear.

She might become homeless. My son wouldn't.

He had somewhere to go.

With me.

Even if that somewhere was a converted bus.

The irony wasn't lost on me. I was hardly living the stable family life anyone would imagine for a two-year-old child. I was medically unable to work, living in a bus and still deeply caught in addiction. My own life was far from healthy.

But that bus was my home. And if my little boy needed it, then it was his home too.

I knew I wasn't perfect. I knew I had enormous problems of my own. But I also knew I couldn't stand by and watch my son potentially enter foster care while I was alive and capable of putting a roof over his head.



There is much more to what happened during this period. Some of it is too painful to put onto these pages. There are parts involving my son, his birth mother, Jenny and me that will remain private. Not every wound needs to become a story for strangers to read.

But one part deserves to be told.

Jenny.

When Jenny met my little boy, she could have looked at him and seen everything I had done wrong. She didn't. She saw a two-year-old child.

And they hit it off almost immediately.

I watched this woman, whom I had already hurt more times than I care to admit, put those feelings aside because there was a little boy who needed someone. She understood that if I didn't take responsibility for him, there was a very real possibility that he could end up in foster care. Neither of us was prepared to allow that to happen.

Jenny opened her heart and her home to him. And somehow, despite everything I had put her through, she opened them to me as well.

What happened next says more about Jenny than anything I could ever write.

She took that little boy on as her own. There was no biological obligation. There was no reason she had to accept responsibility for another consequence of my chaotic life. She could have walked away from the entire situation and nobody could reasonably

have blamed her.

Instead, she became his mum.

She gave him routine when his life had known instability. She gave him a safe home. She fed him, bathed him, dressed him, comforted him, disciplined him, laughed with him and loved him. She was there for the ordinary moments that nobody takes photographs of, the moments that actually build a childhood.

She didn't just tolerate my son because she loved me. She loved him because of who he was.

That distinction matters.

I had discovered my son through a photograph on Facebook. Jenny discovered him through her heart.

His birth mother is no longer part of his life. The circumstances surrounding that are complicated and painful, and they will remain private. My responsibility is to protect my son, not to publicly reopen every part of his childhood. What matters is that he grew up knowing stability, safety and love.

To this day, Jenny continues to be the best mother this boy could ever have asked for.

Sometimes I think back to that Facebook post and wonder how differently everything could have turned out. What if I hadn't been scrolling that day? What if I hadn't seen it? What if I hadn't asked that one question?

"What two-year-old have you got?"

A few words changed the direction of several lives.

I will always carry sadness for the first two years I missed. There are memories between a father and son that I can never create because their time has already passed. Addiction stole enough years from me, but discovering that I had unknowingly missed almost two years of my child's life carried a different kind of pain.



I couldn't change that. What I could do was make sure he never again had to grow up without knowing his dad wanted him.

At that stage of my life, I was still a mess. I was still addicted. I was still making terrible decisions, and there were darker chapters ahead. Discovering my son didn't magically fix me. But he gave me something else to love.

And perhaps the greatest gift in this entire painful chapter wasn't what I did. It was what Jenny did.

After all the hurt I had caused her, she looked at an innocent little boy who arrived unexpectedly in both our lives and made a decision that helped change his future. She chose to love him. She chose to protect him. She chose to become his mum.

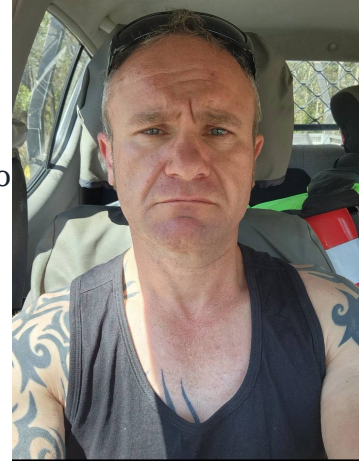
And when I think about the life he could have had compared with the life she helped give him, there are some debts of gratitude that I know I will never be able to repay.

CHAPTER 27

ALMOST AT ROCK BOTTOM

After finding out about my son, we both moved in with Jenny. Her townhouse wasn't really suitable for all of us, so we found a larger place to rent and tried to make a home together.

My bus sat on the front lawn for a while, but eventually I had to accept that it was time to let her go. For years I had imagined travelling around Australia in that bus, going wherever I wanted and living on the road. Now I had a young son to think about, and those plans were going on the back burner for at least another sixteen years. I sold the bus and bought an old Mitsubishi Triton ute instead.



I wish I could say that becoming responsible for my son was the moment I finally took responsibility for my own life. I wish it had been enough to make me stop using dr%g\$ and become the father and partner my family needed me to be.

It wasn't.

My substance use continued to increase, and I spent a lot of time trying to hide it from Jenny. I had stash spots around the house that I thought were clever. They weren't. Jenny would eventually find what I had hidden and confront me about it. Every discovery damaged the trust between us a little more.

Her lack of trust was completely understandable, although at the time I couldn't seem to understand it. My thinking was so distorted that I could lie to her, get caught and then become frustrated when she questioned me later. I wanted her to believe me while continually giving her reasons not to.

Around this time, I started buying old broken lawnmowers, repairing them and selling them. It turned out to be quite lucrative, and because of the problems with my hands, it was something I could do at my own pace. On good days I could work on them, and when my hands were giving me trouble, I could stop. I enjoyed taking something somebody else had given up on, finding what was wrong with it and getting it running again.

Unfortunately, I wasn't doing the same thing with myself.

After another year of my bull\$h!t, Jenny reached her limit.

I had broken her heart. Again.

I can still remember her tears. This was the woman who had stood beside me through years of addiction, lies, excuses and broken promises, and I had hurt her again. Seeing what I had done to her made me feel absolutely worthless. I hated myself with a passion, but even that wasn't enough to make me stop.

Jenny kicked me out.

I couldn't take my son with me when I had nowhere suitable for him to live. Child Safety became involved, and my drug use and behaviour were brought to the attention of authorities. My son was placed in the care of my sister, and I wasn't allowed to see him.

When I first discovered my son existed, one of the things that mattered most to me was giving him some stability. His birth mother had been dealing with her own addiction issues, and I had wanted to protect him from that uncertainty.

Now I was the one creating turmoil in his life.

Most of my family stopped having contact with me, although my two eldest sons continued to call. Jenny changed the locks and blocked my calls.

It happened overnight.

One day I had a home, Jenny, my son, my dog and my family around me. The next, I was sitting in my Triton trying to work out where I was going to sleep.

That was when the dark thoughts really took hold. I reached a point where I didn't care whether I lived or died.

The black dog had come for a good long visit.

Before I completely disappeared, I tried to get help.

I called the Homeless Hotline and emergency accommodation services. I explained that I had nowhere to live and needed somewhere to go. I thought there must be some kind of crisis accommodation available, or at least somebody who could tell me what I was supposed to do next.

Instead, I got referrals.

One service referred me to another. That service gave me another number, which led to another organisation and another referral. Sometimes, after working my way through several calls, I ended up back at a service I had already contacted.

I was going around in circles.

I wasn't expecting anyone to fix my life for me. I knew I had played a huge part in creating the situation I was in. I just needed somewhere safe to sleep.

I couldn't find it.

As my mental state deteriorated, I rang a mental health support number for people in crisis. Making that call wasn't easy.

The phone rang and rang.

Eventually, an answering service picked up and told me nobody was available. There was no option to leave my details or request a call back.

Then the call ended.

I sat there staring at my phone.

After enough phone calls and enough referrals, I quickly lost hope. Eventually I stopped calling.

If I couldn't find somewhere to go, I would find somewhere to hide.

I turned my phone off and went bush.

My family became concerned enough to report me missing to police, but I didn't want to be found.

My substance use became heavier, and with the drug\$ came very little sleep. Combined with the emotional stress I was under, my mind eventually couldn't cope anymore.

I began experiencing psychosis.

I became convinced my phone was being tracked. Even with it turned off, I was suspicious of it. At night, I would look into the sky and see stars that appeared to move or shake. In my mind, they weren't stars anymore. I became convinced they were drones watching me and tracking my movements.

I would stare into the darkness trying to work out what was real and what wasn't, but I could no longer tell the difference. If a light appeared to move, my mind gave it meaning. Someone knew where I was. Someone was watching me.

None of it was real, but the fear certainly was.

The paranoia pushed me towards places where I thought nobody would find me. At times, that meant underground drains.

They were filthy, damp and infested with mosquitoes. There was nowhere to shower or properly wash my clothes, but none of that seemed as important as staying hidden.

Eventually, I found an abandoned house where I could stay for a while. It gave me a roof, but it wasn't safe. At night, kids would sometimes come into the property and smash holes in the walls and break windows. When I heard them inside, I would climb

into the roof cavity and hide, staying as quiet as I could until they were gone.

I would lie above the ceiling in the darkness listening to every sound below me, afraid to move in case somebody heard me. Between the real danger downstairs and the danger my mind was creating outside, hiding in a roof cavity somehow made sense.

Eventually, I bought a swag, I moved from park to park, and eventually i set it up on the back of the Triton.

I found an abandoned shed and parked the ute inside it. I barely wanted to drive anywhere because the psychosis had convinced me that being seen meant being found.

That became home.

Not long before, I had owned a forty foot bus that I had converted into a home. It had a bed, a kitchen, electricity and almost everything I needed. I had once planned to travel around Australia in it.

Now I was sleeping in a swag on the back of an old Triton inside an abandoned shed.

Without the relative comfort and security the bus had once provided, I learned how quickly basic things become important when you don't have them. A shower. A toilet. Clean clothes. Somewhere safe enough to sleep.

There had been other terrible periods in my life, but until then I had always managed to keep some part of my life functioning. This time, I couldn't.

My world had narrowed to getting through each day. I wasn't thinking about next month or next year. I wasn't thinking much beyond the next few hours.

Looking back, I can see that I didn't arrive there because of one terrible decision. It had taken years of addiction, lies, ignored warnings, wasted chances and broken promises to bring me to that abandoned shed.

There I was, lying in a swag on the back of an old Triton, with my mind no longer able to separate fear from reality.

I thought there couldn't possibly be any further to fall.

I was wrong.

I was almost at rock bottom.



CHAPTER 28

THE BLACK DOG

This is probably the hardest chapter I have written.

There are parts of my life I can look back on now and talk about reasonably openly. @dd!ct!on, homelessness, losing almost everything, sleeping in drains, abandoned houses and my car are all things I am not proud of, but I can accept that they happened. This is different. Even writing these words makes me uncomfortable, because there is embarrassment attached to this part of my story that I still struggle with. For a long time, I did not want to think about it, let alone tell other people about it. But if I am going to tell my story, I cannot clean up the parts that are hardest to admit.



By this point, I had reached my lowest point. The black dog had arrived. I had lost almost everything that had once given my life structure. My relationship with Jenny was in pieces, my son was no longer in my care, my work and sense of purpose were gone, @dd!ct!on had taken over, paranoia had distorted my thinking, and homelessness had stripped away whatever stability I had left.

Physically, I was deteriorating as well. I had lost a lot of weight and was down to around 62 kilograms. My body was showing the effects of the way I had been living. I was exhausted, underweight and running myself into the ground, but by then I barely cared what was happening to me.

I had also tried asking for help. I had made the phone calls and contacted crisis services and emergency accommodation services, only to be passed from one organisation to another until eventually I ended up back where I started. I had called a mental health crisis line and listened to the phone ring until an answering machine told me nobody was available. Eventually, I stopped believing anybody was coming to help.

Something changed inside me. I was no longer thinking about how I could fix my life. I was thinking about how I could end it.

One day, I drove out towards one of the dams. Before I went, I told an acquaintance where I was heading. We both knew the area, but I did not tell her what I intended to do. Looking back, I think some tiny part of me still wanted someone to know where I was. I did not necessarily expect to be stopped, but I wanted somebody to know where my car would be and where to look for me.

I waited for a while, but as time passed and nobody came, I remember thinking that was okay. I had already made up my mind. I walked away from the car and into the bush with a plan to end my

life. There was no dramatic moment or sudden revelation where everything became clear and I realised how much I wanted to live. I was exhausted, and my thinking had narrowed down to one terrible conclusion. In my mind, I had become the problem, and removing myself seemed like the only thing left that I could control.

I found a tree and attempted to take my own life. I will not go into every detail of what I did, because the mechanics of it are not what matters. What matters is that I genuinely believed I was going to die there, alone in the bush, and at that moment I had accepted that.

What I did not expect was for the person I had spoken to earlier to actually turn up. She went looking for me and found me partway through my attempt. She intervened before it was too late.

She was furious with me, but beneath the anger was fear and genuine concern. She had just found someone she knew trying to die, and suddenly she was dealing with something neither of us had been prepared for. She got me into the car and decided she was taking me back to Jenny.

On the way there, something happened to me that I had never experienced before. I could not breathe properly, my chest tightened, my heart was racing and everything around me suddenly seemed wrong. I felt trapped inside my own body and completely unable to control what was happening. I was having my first panic attack.

An ambulance was called, but I refused to go with them. Eventually, Jenny agreed to come with me to the hospital. We sat there for several hours, and although I cannot remember every detail of that night, I remember the waiting, being agitated and eventually having a disagreement with Jenny. In the state I was in, I became angry and stormed out of the hospital.

I had just survived an attempt to take my own life, been taken to hospital and given an opportunity to receive help, yet I walked straight back out the door because the thought had not gone away.

That is one of the things I find hardest to explain about that period. Surviving did not suddenly make me grateful to be alive. Being found did not magically repair my thinking. The problems I believed I was escaping were still waiting for me, and my mind was still telling me that there was only one way out.

A couple of days later on the 1/10/23, I decided to try again. This time, I came up with a different plan that involved my vehicle, and I convinced myself that it would work. I drove to a quiet country road, away from other people, and put that plan into action.

I remember sitting alone in the cabin as the air became dangerous. I had a glass pipe in my hand, and even there, at what I believed would be the end my life, Dad was still beside me. Tears were running down my face as I sat there completely convinced that everyone would be better off if I disappeared. I believed Jenny would

be better off, my children would be better off and my family would be better off. In my mind, I had caused enough problems, hurt enough people and become a burden to everyone around me.

None of those thoughts were rational, but they felt completely rational to me at the time. That is probably the most frightening part when I look back now. I was not sitting there thinking that my mind was unwell or that addiction, exhaustion and despair were distorting reality. I believed every thought going through my head.

Even while trying to end my life, I was still trying to numb the pain. Eventually, I became physically sick, my head began pounding and I became incredibly tired. At some point, I lost consciousness.

Everything after that comes back in broken pieces. I vaguely remember movement and voices, and I have a brief memory of a police officer or paramedic pulling me from the vehicle. After that, there is nothing until my next clear memory, when I found myself back in hospital.

I had survived again.

You might imagine that waking up after something like that would bring an overwhelming sense of relief, but it did not. I remember lying there feeling humiliated, embarrassed and defeated. I had reached a point where even surviving felt like another failure. I remember thinking to myself, with absolute disgust, "What a loser. I couldn't even do that."

That thought probably explains better than anything else just how unwell I had become. I could not see what the people around me could see. I could not see a father, a son, a brother, a partner or a human being whose life still had value. I could not imagine that my circumstances could change because I had completely lost the ability to imagine a future. All I could see was the wreckage behind me.

Today, I know that the belief that everyone would be better off without me was not some great truth I had discovered. It was the thinking of a man buried under addiction, homelessness, shame, exhaustion and despair. At the time, however, it felt undeniable.

I had spent years trying to numb pain instead of dealing with it. Whenever reality became unbearable, I escaped into drugs. When that stopped being enough, I ran harder. Eventually, when there was nowhere left to run, I turned against myself.

There is nothing heroic about what happened on those two occasions, and there is nothing romantic about reaching rock bottom. It was frightening, lonely and ugly. I am still embarrassed writing about it, and part of me would rather leave these pages out altogether. But doing that would mean telling only the parts of my story that are comfortable enough to admit.

The truth is that I had reached a place where I no longer wanted tomorrow to arrive. Twice, within the space of only a few days, I tried to make sure it did not.

Somehow, tomorrow came anyway.

CHAPTER 29

DETOX

After everything that had happened, I was promptly released from hospital again. There was no mental health order, no counselling arranged and no real assistance waiting for me when I walked out the doors. I had just reached one of the lowest points of my life, yet I was released straight back into homelessness. Back to my swag I went.



This time I didn't return to what had numbed the pain for so many years. After around twenty five years of addiction, I decided I was going to detox. I had no doctor helping me, no detox facility and no real understanding of what I was about to put myself through. I didn't know much about withdrawal or what was happening inside my body and mind. I found an isolated place, set up my swag and took enough water and supplies to get me through, along with some urine d#ug testing kits.

The first few days were horrendous. My entire body ached and at times I could barely walk. I was exhausted but struggled to sleep. I sweated, felt restless and went through periods where I barely had the energy to move. Then there were the cravings. I knew that one phone call could make all of it disappear. I knew exactly who to call and how quickly I could get something that would take away the pain, but I resisted the urge. I had been at rock bottom, and I wasn't going back.

The depression was probably the worst part. Without anything to numb what I was feeling, everything seemed to hit me at once. I had plenty of time lying in that swag to think about where my life had ended up, and there wasn't much around me to provide a distraction.

Every couple of days I tested my urine. What came up on those tests surprised me. As far as I knew, I had only been using one substance, yet I was testing positive for several. I couldn't say exactly how everything had ended up in my system, but one thing was obvious. I hadn't really known what I was putting into my body. That was frightening to see in front of me on those tests.

It took ten days before I finally produced a clear urine test. Seeing that result meant a lot to me, but a clear test didn't mean everything was suddenly over. It meant those substances were no longer being detected by the test. It didn't mean my mind and body had recovered from around twenty five years of m#thamph#tamine abuse.

I didn't understand the medical side of it at the time, but m#thamph#tamine withdrawal can continue long after the initial crash. Depression, anxiety, exhaustion, cravings, disturbed sleep, mood changes and an inability to properly experience

pleasure can continue for weeks, and for some people symptoms can persist for months. After twenty five years, I wasn't going to wake up on day ten feeling normal because a urine test had finally come back clear. My body might have been clearing the substance, but I was still dealing with the aftermath of what I had put it through for most of my adult life.

Around day five, while I was still detoxing, I made a phone call that Jenny had been asking me to make for years. I called rehab. Every time she had suggested it in the past, I had dismissed the idea. I thought I could sort myself out when I was ready. Now I was the one making the call.

I explained my situation and told them I wanted to come in. They told me I needed to be ten days clean before I could enter. It was also Friday, so I was told to call back on Monday. My heart sank. I was struggling to get through each day and now I had to somehow make it through the weekend as well.

I went back to my swag, but after spending so much time isolated, I decided being completely alone wasn't a good idea. Some friends of mine were living in an abandoned shed. They had substance issues themselves, but by that point they were some of the only friends I had left. They allowed me to set my swag up down the back of the property.

I told them exactly what I was trying to do and asked them for one thing. If I came to them wanting anything, they were to say no, regardless of how desperate I became. They understood. They knew that no one who is addicted really wants to be addicted, and they respected the fact that I wanted out.

Those friends looked after me in ways I will never forget. They fed me, kept me hydrated, gave me clothes when I needed them and let me shower. They checked in on me regularly, comforted me when I was struggling and gave me company when I needed human interaction the most. Anything being used around the property was kept out of my sight and unavailable to me. When I needed to be alone, I could retreat to my swag. When I couldn't handle being alone anymore, there were people there.

There is often a stigma attached to people who use substances, as though addiction automatically makes someone a bad person. These people proved otherwise. They were battling their own addictions and living in an abandoned shed, yet when I needed help, they made room for me and cared for me. They didn't have much, but they shared what they had.

Addiction had caused enormous damage in my own life, so I wasn't blind to what it could do. But I also knew from experience that a person could be struggling with addiction and still be kind, generous and compassionate. These friends certainly were.

Despite being surrounded by people who were still using, I never asked them for anything. The temptation was there, of course. You don't walk away from twenty five years of addiction and suddenly forget it existed. But I was determined to get into

rehab, and that became my focus.

Monday finally arrived and I rang the rehabilitation service again, expecting things to start moving. Instead, I was told somebody would return my call. A couple of days passed and nobody did, so I called again and received the same answer. Still nobody called. I tried again.

This went on for weeks.

That was incredibly frustrating. I had finally reached the point where I wanted help and was doing what had been asked of me, but I couldn't get through the door. I had already passed the ten days they had initially told me I needed to be clean, yet I was still waiting. Each time the phone didn't ring, I wondered how much longer it was going to take.

In the meantime, life continued at the abandoned property. My swag remained down the back, my friends continued looking out for me, and I kept testing myself every couple of days. There was no great plan beyond waiting for that phone call and staying away from the substance that had controlled so much of my life.

A week became two, then three, then four. Eventually, after around five weeks, the phone call finally came.

A bed was available. I was going to rehab.

I remember how happy I was when I heard those words. I had started the process alone in a swag, barely able to walk and knowing that relief from the withdrawals was only a phone call away. Somehow, I had made it through.

I was five weeks clean, and I was proud of that.

After around twenty five years of addiction, I was finally heading to rehab.

CHAPTER 30

REHAB

Entering rehab was a scary experience for me. For years, I had carried a completely false idea of what a rehabilitation centre actually was. In my head, rehab was something like a prison. I imagined locked doors, high fences, no freedom and almost no connection with the outside world. I pictured a place full of dangerous people experiencing psychosis, with staff constantly watching your every move.

Looking back, I am not really sure where that image came from. Maybe television, stories I had heard over the years, or perhaps it was something I had convinced myself of because believing rehab was a terrible place gave me another excuse not to go.

I could not have been more wrong.

After weeks of calling Moonyah, trying to get in and practically begging for a place, the day finally arrived. Here I was. After everything that had happened in the months leading up to it, I knew I couldn't continue living the way I had been living. I needed help, and this time I was prepared to accept it.

Walking through those doors was still frightening. I had spent roughly twenty five years using m#thamphet#mine. Chaos had become normal to me. Even when I hated the life I was living, at least I understood it. Rehab was unfamiliar territory, and I had no idea whether I was capable of succeeding.

Instead of the cold, institutional reception I had imagined, I was warmly welcomed by the staff and the other residents. Nobody treated me like a criminal or a failure. I was another person whose addiction had become unmanageable and who had finally arrived somewhere prepared to help.

Integration into the program was gradual. You weren't thrown into everything on your first day and expected to immediately understand how it all worked. There were rules, of course, with expectations around behaviour, participation and respect for other people.

Part of the routine involved spending around an hour each day helping with jobs around the facility. They weren't enormous tasks, but after homelessness and years of addiction, having somewhere to be and something expected of me helped restore a sense of purpose that had disappeared from my life.



The rehabilitation program involved several classes throughout the day. We learned about addiction, behaviours, triggers, relapse prevention and the things happening underneath substance use. The people at Moonyah were there for many different reasons. Some were struggling with alcohol, others with methamphetamine or other drugs, and there were people dealing with different forms of substance dependence. Our stories and substances might have been different, but addiction was the common ground.

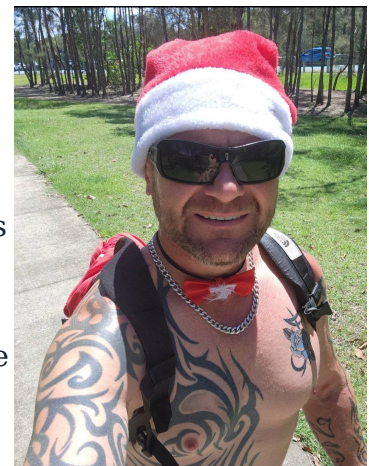
Recovery wasn't presented as just removing drugs or alcohol from your body and hoping everything would sort itself out. Getting a substance out of your system was only part of it. You had to understand what drove your addiction, recognise your triggers and develop tools for dealing with life when you eventually returned to the outside world.

For me, that also meant confronting things from my past that I had spent years burying. Trauma, grief, anger, guilt, shame and experiences I had never properly dealt with had followed me through much of my adult life. Methamphetamine had become an incredibly effective way of avoiding some of those feelings, until the thing I was using to escape my problems became the biggest problem of all.

The days were structured without feeling like imprisonment. We generally had classes and program commitments, while many afternoons allowed us some freedom to decide what we wanted to do. We could spend time around the facility or, depending on where we were in the program and the relevant rules, head out.

A number of us joined the local gym. Plenty of residents attended Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings. There were also opportunities for church outings and trips in the minibus for those who wanted to attend.

It is important to make clear that Moonyah was not a religious based rehabilitation program. Although it is operated by The Salvation Army, religion wasn't forced upon me, and nobody told me what I had to believe. Opportunities existed for people who wanted to explore faith or attend church, but that choice was left to the individual.



The idea of a "higher power" was referred to fairly often, particularly around some of the recovery principles we were learning. What that meant was left to your own interpretation. For one person it might have been God or a particular faith. For someone else it could have represented the universe, nature, family, community or something greater than themselves.

Given my own complicated history with religion, that distinction mattered. I wasn't interested in having somebody else's beliefs pushed onto me. At Moonyah, they

weren't.

For me, walking became my escape. I would put on my shoes, stick my headphones in and start walking. Sixteen kilometres in a day wasn't unusual. There was something therapeutic about putting one foot in front of the other and letting my mind settle. Occasionally I combined those walks with pamphlet drops for the facility. I could cover a ridiculous amount of ground, so I figured I may as well be useful while doing it.

Moonyah also had a swimming pool, which everyone loved, particularly during the warmer weather. Some evenings there were organised activities and events. There were conversations, jokes and ordinary moments that probably don't sound particularly significant from the outside, but after the life I had been living, ordinary was something I was beginning to appreciate.

I had expected rehab to remove my freedom. Instead, it started teaching me how to live responsibly with it.

After you had been there for a few weeks and progressed through the program, you could apply for weekend leave. Those weekends were a highlight because they allowed me to reconnect with my family. I could spend time with my two older boys and have supervised time with my youngest son, who was being cared for by my sister.



I knew I had a lot to prove.

Random drug and alcohol testing was mandatory at Moonyah, and I completely understood why. Every clean result gave me something measurable. It showed my family, Child Safety and myself that my actions were beginning to match what I was saying.

After twenty five years of addiction, promises weren't enough anymore.

Eventually, I wanted my youngest son back in my care. I understood that wasn't something I was automatically entitled to just because I was his father. I had to demonstrate that I could provide him with a safe, stable and sober environment.

I owed that to him.

The residential program at Moonyah was approximately three months. The cost was around 80 percent of a person's Centrelink payment or an equivalent contribution. I wasn't receiving Centrelink at the time, so the staff worked with my circumstances and came up with a very reasonable weekly amount that I could manage.

During my time there, I watched a lot of people come and go. Some arrived ready to change. Others thought they were ready but discovered they weren't quite there yet. Some left, relapsed and eventually returned to give it another go.

Moonyah understood the reality of addiction. The staff could be firm because boundaries mattered, but they were also fair and understanding. They knew that someone struggling did not automatically mean that person was beyond help. For some people, recovery takes several attempts.



The people around me came from completely different backgrounds. Some had families waiting for them. Others had lost almost everything. There were people dealing with homelessness, legal problems, health issues, unemployment and broken relationships.

Addiction doesn't have one particular face.

The support at Moonyah went well beyond staying away from drugs or alcohol. Residents were allocated case workers or counsellors who could help with practical issues such as legal matters, health concerns, dental treatment, eyesight, employment opportunities and pathways towards housing.

That support matters because addiction rarely exists neatly on its own. By the time someone reaches residential rehabilitation, there can be years of consequences to deal with. Becoming sober doesn't make those problems disappear, but having someone help you work through them can make them feel possible to overcome.

There were uncomfortable moments during my time there. Recovery required me to look at parts of myself and my past that I didn't particularly want to examine. I had to acknowledge damage I had caused while also dealing with things that had happened to me long before addiction took control of my life.

None of that could be undone. What I could change was what happened next.

Slowly, life became more stable. I ate properly, exercised, attended classes, spoke with counsellors and began thinking beyond whatever problem happened to be directly in front of me. I started considering what sort of father and person I wanted to be when I eventually walked back out those gates.



There was no miracle moment where I suddenly became a completely different person. Twenty five years of m#thamph#tamine addiction wasn't going to disappear because I had entered a rehabilitation centre. Moonyah gave me the tools and support, but ultimately I still had to make the decisions that came with using them.

There is one date that now represents all of that for me.

1 October 2023.

That was the date I tried to end my l!fe.

It is confronting to think about now, because 1 October 2023 could have been the date written on my headstone.

Instead, it became my sober date.

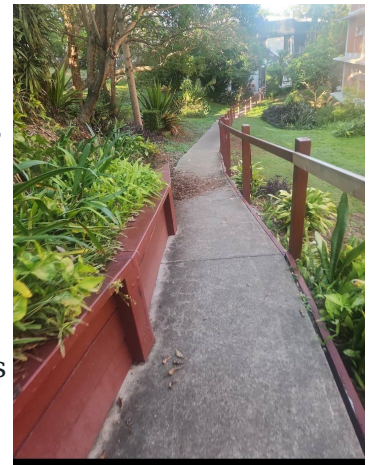
As I write this, I am approaching three years clean. I don't take that for granted. I am incredibly grateful to The Salvation Army's Moonyah rehabilitation program and the dedicated, patient and understanding staff who helped me when I desperately needed it.

They gave me an opportunity, but I also had to make a choice.

I had to decide that I wanted a different life and then keep making the choices required to build one. I wanted to do it for my children. I wanted to do it for Jenny.

Most of all, I finally understood that I needed to do it for myself.

The date that could have marked the end of my life now marks the beginning of the life I fought to get back.



1 October 2023 could have been on my headstone.

Instead, it is the date I got clean.

CHAPTER 31

FINDING PURPOSE.

After completing the three month live in rehabilitation program at Moonya, I graduated.

Walking out of rehab was something I had worked incredibly hard for, but graduation did not mean I was fixed. If anything, it meant the real work was about to begin. For three months I had lived inside an environment designed around recovery. There were routines, boundaries, counselling, support and people around me who understood addiction. Now it was time to take everything I had learned and put it into practice in the real world.



I had to learn how to live without constantly self medicating.

For me, that meant making some difficult decisions. I could no longer associate with many of the only friends I had. I needed to stay away from people, places and situations that could trigger me. I had to recognise the warning signs in myself and learn how to deal with emotions instead of trying to escape from them.

Most importantly, I needed purpose.

Before going into rehab, I had bought an empty old truck. That truck still sits on my lawn today.

I bought it because I genuinely did not know where I was going to live once rehab was finished. My future was uncertain. I had no rental history, no employment and no regular income. The operations on my wrists had taken away my ability to return to much of the physical work I had done throughout my life. I had a trade background and plenty of practical skills, but suddenly there were restrictions around what my body would allow me to do.

The truck was not some exciting project or dream of travelling around Australia. It was insurance against homelessness.

If everything else failed, I could turn it into somewhere to live.

I had around \$20,000 in savings, but I knew I needed to protect that money. I could not just burn through it trying to survive. My goal was eventually to have my son returned to my care, and if that happened, I needed to be able to support both of us.

A halfway house or shared accommodation was not really suitable either. Perhaps it could have worked temporarily for me alone, but I was trying to build towards something bigger than that. I wanted to be a father to my boy again. Even the truck, while potentially enough for me, was never going to be a proper long term home for a

child.

Once again, housing stood between where I was and where I desperately wanted to be.

Throughout my time at Moonya, Jenny had kept her distance. We had very little direct contact, and any contact with my son was organised through my sister, who he was living with at the time.

Child Safety was involved, as you would expect given everything that had happened. There were requirements I had to meet before visits with my son, including mandatory urine testing. I was completely happy to do it. I understood why those safeguards existed, and I knew that nobody owed me their trust just because I said I had changed.

My sobriety had to be demonstrated through my actions.

Getting my boy back was one of my biggest long term goals.

I want to make something very clear here. I had never been a bad father to my children. I loved my kids deeply. I had always been affectionate, loving, kind and fun with them. My children knew that I loved them.

But loving your children does not automatically mean you are in a position to safely care for them.

My substance abuse had become severe. It had contributed to psychosis, self harm and a complete collapse of my life. There is a difference between being a bad person and being a person who is no longer capable of providing the stability a child deserves. As painful as that was for me to accept, at that point in my life I had become the latter.

Love was not enough.

I had to prove that I could provide stability as well.

While I was doing that, Jenny had been watching my progress from a distance. She was communicating with my family and could see the changes I was trying to make. She also understood something that I was becoming increasingly worried about. Without somewhere stable to live, there was virtually no chance of my son being returned to my care.

Despite everything I had put her through, Jenny made an extraordinary decision.

She put our differences aside and allowed me to stay in her home.

That did not magically repair our relationship. It did not erase what had happened, and it certainly did not mean everything was forgiven. Trust does not return because somebody completes rehab. When you spend years damaging trust, you cannot expect another person to hand it straight back.

But she gave me an opportunity.

For the next four months, I continued doing what was required of me. There were processes to follow, boxes to tick and hoops to jump through. I kept working on myself, stayed sober and did everything I could to demonstrate that I could once again provide a safe and stable environment for my boy.

Then, eventually, the day came.

I got my son back.

It is difficult to explain what that meant to me.

Only months earlier, I had been at the lowest point of my life. I had lost my home, my stability, my sense of direction and, for a period, the ability to have my child living with me. Now I was sober, rebuilding my life and holding my boy knowing that I had earned back the right and responsibility of being his full time dad.

I was incredibly grateful.

There was still plenty of work ahead.

My relationship with Jenny was badly damaged, and rebuilding trust would take much longer than rebuilding a routine. We attended couples counselling during those early stages and started trying to work through some of what had happened.

I also continued with aftercare through Lives Lived Well, an organisation that provides alcohol and other drug counselling and recovery support. Rehab had given me tools, but recovery did not finish the day I graduated. After twenty five years of addiction, I knew three months in a program was not going to undo everything overnight.

There was another part of my recovery that I was still searching for.

Purpose.

I desperately needed something positive to do with my life.

One of the strangest things I discovered during recovery was something I can only describe as finding my soul.

Addiction had taken so much from me over twenty five years that I had become numb to a lot of things. People would talk about everyone having a soul, and I genuinely used to wonder what that meant. Sometimes I wondered whether I even had one.

For years, most of my energy had been directed towards survival, addiction, getting through the day and trying to silence whatever was happening inside my own head. There was not much room left for anything else.

After Moonya, something began changing.

I started feeling things differently.

Empathy was one of them.

It was not that I had never cared about anyone before. Of course I had. I loved my children and the people close to me. But this was different. I started looking beyond myself. I began thinking about what my family had experienced because of my addiction. I started recognising the pain I had caused. I developed compassion for myself too, which was something I had never really understood.

And slowly, I started noticing other people.

A couple of months after leaving rehab, Jenny and I went for a scenic drive along the Redcliffe waterfront.

It should have been an ordinary drive.

Instead, I noticed tents.

One after another.

I started counting them.

There were 49.

Some had one person living inside. Others had couples. Some had families.

I could not stop looking at them.

Only six months earlier, I had been living in circumstances not that different from the people I was now looking at. I knew what it was like to have nowhere secure to call home. I knew the embarrassment. I knew the uncertainty of wondering where you would sleep and what tomorrow would bring.

More than anything, I remembered what it felt like to think nobody cared.

This time, instead of driving past and forgetting about it, something inside me told me I needed to do something.

I did not have an organisation. I did not have funding. I did not have a warehouse, volunteers, sponsors or some grand plan.

I certainly did not think I was starting anything.

I just wanted to help a few people.

So I went onto social media and asked whether anyone could donate non perishable groceries so I could put together some food hampers.

Predictably, not everybody thought it was a good idea.

The snarky comments started appearing. Some people believed those living in tents were undeserving of help. Others questioned their circumstances without knowing anything about them. There were even people who suggested I might be collecting the groceries to stock up my own cupboards.

I had only recently rebuilt my own life, and here were complete strangers deciding what kind of person I was and what kind of people those living in tents must be.

But amongst the negativity, something much more important happened.

People helped.

Groceries started coming in.

A few bags became more bags. People contacted me offering tins, pasta, cereal and other food. I spent my days driving around in my ute collecting donations from people who believed that helping somebody did not require knowing their entire life story first.

Before long, my house began filling with groceries.

I sorted everything and made up hampers.

Eventually, I had fifty of them.

Then I went back out and delivered them.

I still remember the response.

The gratitude was overwhelming. To me, it was just a box or bag of groceries. To the people receiving them, it meant something much bigger. Somebody had noticed them. Somebody had stopped. Somebody had bothered to ask how they were going.

And something happened to me at the same time.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt useful.

Not because I was earning money. Not because I had a job title or a trade. Not because somebody was telling me I had done well in recovery.

I felt useful because I had helped another human being.

Six months earlier, I had been the person who needed help.

Now I was standing on the other side of the conversation.

I understood their embarrassment because I had felt it. I understood the uncertainty because I had lived it. I knew how easily a human being could disappear from ordinary life and become somebody that others drove past, judged or pretended not to see.

I had gone looking for purpose because I thought I needed something to fill my days.

Instead, I found people.

I did not know it at the time, but those fifty hampers were going to change the direction of my life.

For now, though, there was no Nourish Street.

There was just me, an old ute, fifty food hampers and a group of people living in tents along the Redcliffe waterfront.

And for the first time in years, I knew exactly what I wanted to do the next day.

Help again.

CHAPTER 32

NOURISH STREET

After that first food drop, I genuinely thought my little contribution was over. I had made up some hampers, delivered them to people who needed them and figured that would probably be the end of it. There was no plan behind what I was doing. I certainly wasn't thinking about starting an organisation. I was just trying to do something useful with what had been given to me.

But the food kept coming. Within a couple of weeks, I had enough to make up more hampers, so I packed them, loaded the ute and headed out again. One trip became another, and without really noticing when it happened, something I had intended as a one off had started to grow.



Then one day someone asked if we wanted a whole lot of sausages left over from a Bunnings sausage sizzle. I remember looking at them and thinking, what the hell are we going to do with all these sausages? Jenny knew exactly what to do. Her signature curried sausages with mashed potato. We bought potatoes, the other ingredients and takeaway containers, and she turned those leftover sausages into around 70 proper home cooked meals.

I loaded them into the ute and headed out with my constant companion, Mack, my Staffy. Mack went everywhere with me in those early days. We drove into camps and places that many people would probably have been nervous about entering, yet I never once experienced aggression directed towards me. People were generally kind and respectful. More than anything, they seemed grateful that somebody had bothered to stop.

Trust didn't come immediately. Some people were very guarded when I first approached them, and I soon understood why. Almost everyone had experienced judgement because they were homeless. I heard stories of verbal abuse, people yelling from passing cars and even objects being thrown at them. When somebody has been treated badly enough times, they learn to be cautious about the next stranger who walks towards them.

I never pushed. I just kept turning up.

Slowly, people began talking to me. I heard about broken relationships, financial hardship, family circumstances and the exhausting search for somewhere to live. Some conversations lasted a few minutes, while others went much longer. I began learning names and recognising faces. Behind every tent, tarp and park bench was a person with a story that couldn't be explained by the stereotypes so often attached to homelessness.

As I visited more people, I started noticing just how little some of them had. There were ripped tents that barely kept the weather out, tarps being used as shelter and people sleeping on park benches with virtually nothing. I couldn't give somebody a house, but perhaps I could at least give them something better to sleep in.

I put a post on Facebook asking for tents, sleeping bags and blankets. Before long, my garage started filling up. Then the rest of the house began losing the battle for space as well. Our family home was gradually turning into a storeroom for everything we were taking out each night.

At the same time, something extraordinary was happening in our little kitchen.

What started with those 70 serves of curried sausages grew until Jenny was cooking around 100 meals every single day. Around 700 meals a week were coming out of our small home kitchen, while she was still working full time.

Jenny never stops amazing me with the amount of love she has to give. I already knew the love she had for me, my son and our family, but now I was watching her extend that same compassion to complete strangers she had never met. Most of the people eating those meals didn't know who had cooked them, and Jenny didn't know who would receive them. She didn't need to. Knowing somebody was hungry was enough.

Much of what Jenny did happened quietly behind the scenes. She would finish her own working day and then stand in our kitchen preparing meal after meal. She didn't see the reaction when somebody opened a container of hot home cooked food or hear the thank you that followed. I did, and I knew exactly where every one of those meals had started.

While Jenny cooked, Mack and I delivered. Often my two eldest sons, Kane and Zion, came along to help. We were out seven nights a week, loading the ute and travelling between camps and other places where people were sleeping rough. Many nights I wouldn't walk back through our front door until around one in the morning.

Behind everything we were doing was a problem that was becoming impossible to ignore.

There was no funding.

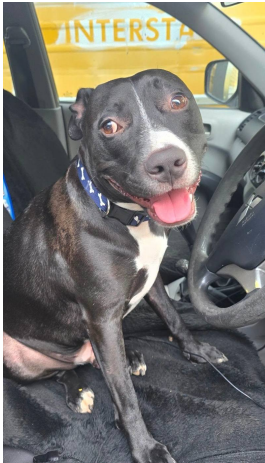
When I finished rehab, I had around \$20,000 in personal savings. It wasn't a fortune, but it was important to me. I had uncertainty around my future employment because of my wrists, responsibilities of my own and no great financial safety net behind me. That money was supposed to help provide some security while I worked out what came next.



Instead, I began spending it on what we were doing.

At first, the individual costs didn't seem enormous. Ingredients to turn whatever food we had into proper meals. Potatoes, vegetables and other groceries. Takeaway containers. Fuel for another night on the road. Basic supplies that somebody desperately needed. Each purchase seemed manageable on its own.

But 700 meals a week changes the maths very quickly. Add seven nights of fuel and all the other little expenses, and the money disappears faster than you expect.



I watched my savings shrink.

Twenty thousand became fifteen. Fifteen became ten. Then suddenly there wasn't much left.

I knew exactly what was happening every time I checked my bank account. The sensible thing would have been to put a limit on it, protect what I had left and tell myself I had already done enough. But by then I knew the people I was visiting. I knew their names, where they slept and some of what they were going through. It was much harder to make a financial decision when you knew the person affected by it.

So I kept paying until there was virtually nothing left.

That frightened me. I wasn't someone with another large bank account sitting somewhere. The roughly \$20,000 I had after rehab was my personal safety net, and I had watched almost all of it disappear into food, containers, fuel and supplies.

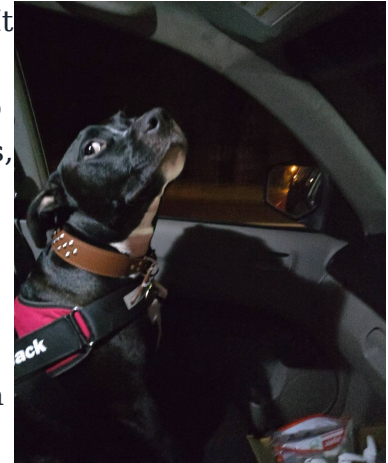
Still, every night the ute went out.

A few local businesses helped ease some of the pressure. Several bakeries offered bread and leftover goods, with the legends at Bracken Ridge Bakery stepping up from the beginning. Their practical support made a genuine difference at a time when every dollar counted.

I also approached more churches than I care to remember. Many showed interest and offered encouraging words, but at that stage very little practical assistance followed. Given my religious upbringing, I found that difficult to reconcile with the biblical teachings I had heard throughout my childhood about feeding the hungry and caring for those in need. Standing in front of somebody who hadn't eaten gave those teachings a very different meaning. Hungry people didn't need promises. They needed dinner.

I continued documenting what we were doing on Facebook. It gave me a way to show people a side of homelessness they might otherwise never see. I wanted the wider community to look beyond the tents and understand that there were names, families, personalities and complicated lives behind them. It also allowed people to see what we were doing and why.

Somewhere amongst the cooking, the late nights, our disappearing garage space and Mack riding around beside me in the ute, we realised our little family initiative needed a name.



We called it Nourish Street.

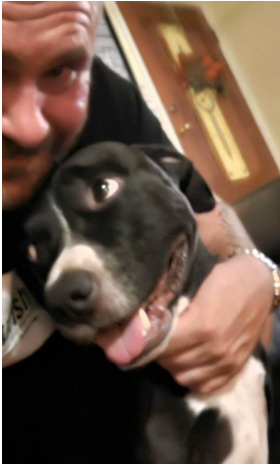
It felt right. Food nourished the body, but I was learning there was another part to what we were doing. Sometimes the most important thing I could give somebody wasn't in the back of the ute. It was my time. A conversation. A chance for somebody to speak without being judged. To me, Nourish Street meant nourishing people on the street with food while nourishing the soul through human connection.

Then I saw the name written across my ute for the first time.

Signarama at Brendale had seen my Facebook posts and generously offered to do the sign writing. Seeing Nourish Street on the vehicle was surreal. What had begun with a few food hampers now had a name people could recognise.

Unfortunately, by the time it had a name, I had almost nothing left to fund it.

That was when a woman named Kel approached me. She told me she loved what I was doing and asked how she could help. I told her exactly where things stood. I was reaching the point where I might have to stop. My personal savings had been drained down to virtually nothing, and regardless of how much I wanted to continue, there was a financial reality I couldn't ignore.



Kel listened and suggested something I had thought about before: turning Nourish Street into a registered charity.

The idea wasn't new to me, but I had never been able to get my head around how to actually do it. I didn't have the knowledge, the time or, if I'm truthful, even the mental capacity to process everything involved. I was already stretched trying to keep the day to day operation moving. The thought of constitutions, committees, registrations, regulations and paperwork felt completely beyond me.

Kel helped me understand that it didn't have to remain just an idea. Becoming a registered charity could give us a legitimate way to raise funds, provide transparency and accountability, and allow what we had started to continue without relying on whatever happened to be left in my personal bank account.

Her timing couldn't have been better.

I had reached the limit of what one family could personally carry.

Only a short time earlier, Nourish Street hadn't even existed. There had been no organisation, no office, no funding and no long term plan. There was Jenny cooking in our little kitchen, my boys helping when they could, Mack riding beside me and an old ute heading out into the night.

We had started with what we had.

Now what I had was virtually gone.

But something had grown from it that I wasn't prepared to walk away from.

Nourish Street.

If it was going to keep going, it was time to find out whether this little family initiative could become something that could stand on its own.

Kel remains the secretary of Nourish Street Inc today. □

Thankyou for everything you have done, and continue to do!



CHAPTER 33

THE NEXT BUS

One night I was out doing outreach around Redcliffe with Mack. We were making our usual rounds, checking places where people were sleeping rough and handing out meals, water and whatever else I had in the vehicle.

I pulled into a park along the Redcliffe waterfront and stopped to speak with a woman. While we were talking, I noticed a man near a bus stop. He was extremely agitated and punching the structure around him.



I told the woman I was going to check on him.

She warned me not to.

She had good reason. I knew nothing about this man or how he might react to a stranger approaching him. But watching him from across the park, I couldn't bring myself to leave without at least trying.

I grabbed a meal, some water and a dessert and walked over.

"Are you okay?"

"No."

There was something about the way he answered that told me enough.

I got him to sit down and offered him the food. As we began talking, he told me he had just broken up with his partner. He had done things he regretted and made choices he desperately wished he could take back. The anger I had seen from across the park quickly disappeared, and underneath it was a man who was hurting badly.

I knew regret.

There were plenty of things in my own life I wished I could go back and change. I knew what it was like to live with the consequences of your own decisions and to hurt people you cared about. I didn't need to tell him what he had done wrong. He already knew.

So I listened.

For about fifteen minutes he poured his heart out. He ate some of the food and gradually became calmer. I couldn't change what had happened in his relationship or take away the things he regretted, but I could give him those few minutes to talk.

Eventually, I stood up to leave.

That was when he stopped me.

He told me that if I hadn't walked over, he was going to step in front of the next bus that came past.

I froze.

Tears were running down his face as he thanked me.

I looked at the bus stop, then back at him.

I had almost driven away.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about what I had done. I had carried over a meal and asked a man if he was okay. Yet without knowing it, I had walked into one of the darkest moments of his life.

I left that park shaken.

Outreach continued, and over time I met hundreds more people. I never knew what happened to the man from the bus stop. We hadn't exchanged details, and I knew almost nothing about him beyond what he had shared that night.

About a year later, a young woman came into HQ.

I didn't recognise her.

She asked me if I remembered a night on the Redcliffe waterfront when I had approached a distressed man near a bus stop.

Of course I remembered.

Then she told me he was her father.

She had come to thank me.

Her dad had told her what happened that night. She knew what he had been planning before I walked over and what those fifteen minutes had meant.

That was the part that really got me.

Until that moment, I had only ever thought of him as the man from the bus stop. Suddenly I was standing in front of his daughter.

When I approached him that night, I knew nothing about the life surrounding him. I didn't know who would receive a devastating phone call if he stepped onto that road. I didn't know who might spend years wondering whether they could have done something differently.

Now one of those people was standing in front of me.

Her visit gave me something outreach rarely does. It showed me what happened after I left.

I have handed out thousands of meals over the years. I've had conversations with people whose names I never learned and others I may never see again. You don't usually get to know whether those few minutes meant anything once you drive away.

This time I did.

I have thought about that night many times since, but not because I believe I saved someone or did something heroic. What stays with me is how close I came to never knowing.

From across the park, I saw an angry man punching a bus stop.

Fifteen minutes later, I knew why.

A year later, I met his daughter.

Sometimes you have no idea what is happening inside the person standing in front of you.

I'm just grateful that night I asked.

"Are you okay?"

CHAPTER 34

STANDING UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT

There are times in life when you see something happening in front of you and have to decide whether you are prepared to stand up and say it is wrong. Eddie Hyland Park was one of those times for me.

For several months I had been regularly visiting the park at Lawnton through Nourish Street. I knew many of the people living there. I had sat with them, listened to them, brought them food and supplies and watched their situations unfold. To someone driving past, it might have looked like a collection of tents scattered across a public park. Once you spent time there, it looked very different. Every tent had a person behind it, and every person had a reason they had ended up there.



I have never believed that homelessness gives anybody an exemption from personal responsibility. Public spaces should be safe and clean, and people living in them have responsibilities just like everybody else. But what I was witnessing went beyond maintaining a park. People with nowhere suitable to live were being told they could no longer remain where they had found some form of shelter. The question that kept coming back to me was obvious. Where were they supposed to go?

Some had been waiting for housing for years. Others had circumstances that made temporary accommodation difficult or unsuitable. Pets, partners, mental health, physical health and countless other factors complicated what looked straightforward on paper. Referrals were being offered, but referrals were not houses. As I said publicly at the time, you can't sleep on a referral.

The City of Moreton Bay had previously operated a framework that allowed people experiencing homelessness to camp on Council land under certain conditions. In February 2025, Council announced that framework would be repealed, with the change taking effect on 12 March. What followed was a much harder approach to people sleeping rough on public land. Compliance notices were issued, with potential fines running into thousands of dollars for people who failed to comply. I watched people who were already living with enormous uncertainty become frightened about losing what little stability they had.

Having experienced homelessness myself, I understood something that can be difficult to explain to somebody who has always had a front door to lock at night. When you have almost nothing, the little you do have becomes incredibly important. A tent might not look like much to somebody passing by, but when it is the only thing separating you from the weather, losing it can mean losing the closest thing you have to a home.

On 9 April 2025, Nourish Street held a peaceful protest outside the City of Moreton Bay council chambers at Strathpine. We stood beside Gympie Road holding signs and asking motorists to honk in support of people experiencing homelessness. Cars sounded their horns as they passed. I wanted Council and the wider community to understand what these policies looked like from the other side.

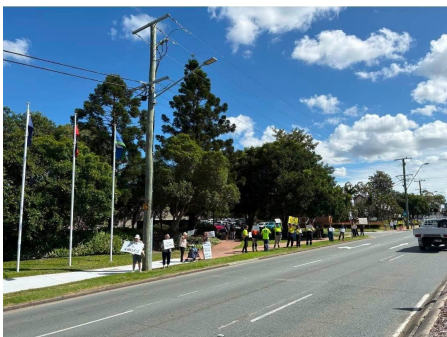
On that same day, less than four kilometres away, Council officers were carrying out enforcement at Eddie Hyland Park. While we were outside the council chambers protesting the treatment of people sleeping rough, Council officers, police, trucks and an excavator were at the park where many of those people were living. Contemporary reporting recorded about fifteen tents at the park when authorities arrived. Residents described being given an hour to remove their belongings once enforcement began, while Council maintained that eight of the people present had previously received compliance notices more than two weeks earlier.



When I saw what was unfolding, I could hardly believe it. People were trying to work out what they could take and, more importantly, where they were going to go. Whatever arguments existed about local laws and compliance notices, these were human beings facing the loss of their shelter without permanent homes waiting for them at the other end.

One man I knew from the park had been on the social housing waiting list for around two years. He had been offered temporary motel accommodation but said he had never been offered permanent social housing. Another woman explained that motel accommodation presented its own problem because she could not take her service dog. These were the realities hidden behind the word move.

Council returned to Eddie Hyland Park on 24 April and removed more property. Among the people caught up in what happened were Debbie and John Bobeldyk. Their story would become one of the most confronting parts of everything that followed.



Among their belongings was an urn containing the ashes of their deceased daughter. Debbie later described panicking as she and John tried to retrieve what they could. They said they had been given an hour to collect their belongings before the remainder was removed. Their tents, fridge and other possessions could eventually be replaced.

Their daughter's ashes could not.

They disappeared during the removal of their belongings and were never recovered. The following day was Anzac Day. Debbie and John were left sheltering beneath a tarp

as rain came down around them.

I struggled to comprehend that this was happening in my own community. By then, my concern went beyond where somebody would sleep that night. I could see what the uncertainty and enforcement were doing to people who were already living under enormous pressure. Removing their shelter did nothing to address the circumstances that had put them there.

I knew we had to do more than protest.



Paul Slater, from what was then Northwest Community Group, was also advocating strongly for people sleeping rough. Between those directly affected, community advocates, Nourish Street and Northwest Community Group, we began looking at whether what was happening could be challenged legally. That eventually brought us into contact with Basic Rights Queensland.

I played a part in initiating the court case with Basic Rights Queensland. I wasn't a lawyer and I didn't pretend to understand every piece of legislation involved. My role came from being on the ground. I knew these people. I had witnessed what was happening, spoken publicly about it, organised protest action and challenged decisions I believed were wrong. I wanted those decisions properly examined through the legal system.



Basic Rights Queensland took on the legal fight alongside Hall & Wilcox, whose lawyers acted for the rough sleepers. Hall & Wilcox's involvement brought significant legal expertise and resources to a battle that people living in tents could never realistically have fought alone. The Queensland Human Rights Commission later intervened in the proceedings,

providing submissions to assist the Court in considering how Queensland's Human Rights Act applied.

What had begun with people living in tents in a park at Lawnton was heading for the Supreme Court of Queensland.

The proceedings ultimately included *Bobeldyk & Anor v Moreton Bay City Council*; *Eichin & Ors v Moreton Bay City Council*. Behind those formal case names were people I knew. People whose tents I had walked past, whose stories I had heard and whose lives had been directly affected by the decisions now being examined by one of Queensland's highest courts.

The legal battle continued for months. In August 2025, Justice Paul Smith granted an injunction restraining further enforcement against applicants while the challenge proceeded. Then came 6 March 2026, when the Supreme Court of Queensland handed down its decision.



The Court found that Council officers had discretion about whether and how the relevant local laws were enforced. Because that discretion existed, officers were required to properly consider the human rights and individual circumstances of the people affected. The Court found they had failed to do so.

The judgment dealt with rights including protection from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, privacy and home, protection of families and property rights. Importantly, the Court recognised that it had been open to Council to wait until alternative accommodation became available, or until a person had unreasonably refused an offer of accommodation, before taking enforcement action.

That brought everything back to the question I had been asking from the beginning.



Where were they supposed to go?

The decision also recognised something incredibly important. For the purposes of human rights law, the concept of a person's home could extend to the place where somebody experiencing homelessness was

actually living. A tent might not have bricks, a letterbox or a title deed, but the human being living inside it still had rights.

There was satisfaction in knowing that what happened had finally been examined by the Court and that accountability had followed, but I couldn't celebrate what people had endured to get us there. Debbie and John still didn't have their daughter's ashes. Others had spent months living with uncertainty and distress. A Supreme Court judgment could establish rights and responsibilities, but it couldn't hand somebody the keys to a home.

Standing up also came with a personal cost. By putting my name and face behind the issue, speaking publicly, protesting and helping push the matter towards a legal challenge, I became unpopular with some people. I read comments suggesting that because Nourish Street fed people, supplied tents and advocated for rough sleepers, we were somehow contributing to homelessness. At times you would think I had personally caused the housing crisis, the shortage of affordable rentals and the rising cost of living.



I understand why residents become frustrated when they see rubbish, damaged public spaces or antisocial behaviour. I don't defend those things, and supporting somebody experiencing homelessness does not mean excusing everything they do. Public spaces belong to the whole community. But providing somebody with a meal or shelter from the rain does not create homelessness. Nourish Street was responding to a crisis that was already unfolding in front of us.

I didn't stand up because I wanted people permanently living in parks. I didn't. Public parks cannot become Australia's answer to a shortage of housing. I stood up because forcing somebody from one patch of grass to another without addressing why they were homeless wasn't a solution. If someone leaves a park only to sleep behind a building, beside a railway line, in another reserve or underneath a bridge, their homelessness has not disappeared. It has only moved.

Eddie Hyland Park also changed my understanding of what Nourish Street could be. Food mattered. Tents mattered. Sleeping bags mattered. Sitting down and listening mattered. But sometimes the problem was bigger than anything we could carry in the back of an outreach vehicle. Sometimes helping people meant being prepared to speak publicly, challenge decisions and accept that doing so might make you unpopular.



When I think back to Eddie Hyland Park, I don't think first about the courtroom, the lawyers, the media interviews or even the judgment. I think about people standing beside the few possessions they had, trying to work out where they were supposed to go. I think about Debbie and John, and something precious that no court decision could ever return to them.

Public parks were never the answer to homelessness, and I never pretended they were. But neither was pushing people from one place to another without somewhere suitable for them to live.

That fight began for me in a park at Lawnton.

It began with people.

CHAPTER 35

BIGGER THAN US

There came a point when Jenny looked around our house and the message was pretty clear.

Get this out of my house.

And to be fair, she had a point.

Nourish Street had completely outgrown our home. Food, tents, sleeping bags, hygiene products and donated goods seemed to occupy every available space. Our house had become a makeshift warehouse, office and distribution centre while somehow still needing to be the place where our family lived.

By then, Nourish Street was already much bigger than Jenny and me. When we established it as a charity, we had to have a board so important decisions were made by a group of people rather than resting with one or two. That board included me, Jenny, Peter, Sandra and Kel, and it was already in place before we ever considered moving into a warehouse.

I might have founded Nourish Street, but I never wanted it to become an organisation where everything depended on what Beau wanted. Having Jenny, Peter, Sandra and Kel around the table meant different opinions, experience and ideas could be considered when we made important decisions about where the charity was heading.

One of those decisions was becoming obvious every time we walked through our front door.

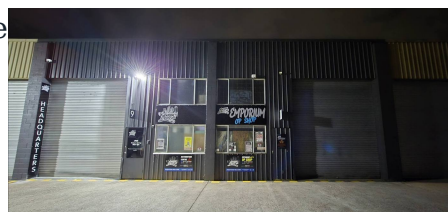
We needed to get Nourish Street out of the house.

It was not just about running out of room. As Nourish Street became better known, our residential address was becoming known too, and people seeking assistance sometimes turned up at our home. I wanted to help people, but Jenny and our children deserved privacy and security. Our family home could not also be the public address of a growing charity.



We needed somewhere people could approach Nourish Street, volunteers could work and donations could be delivered without everyone needing to know where our family lived.

We eventually found a warehouse on Kremzow Road at Brendale.



I remember walking through it and thinking how good the space could be for us. It was run down and definitely wasn't very flash, but compared with what we had been working with, it felt like a massive step forward. I could already picture shelves filled with supplies, donations being sorted and packed, and our outreach gear finally having somewhere to live other than inside our family home.

Before we could properly move in, though, the place needed some work. The kind folk from the CFMEU volunteered their time and resources to help us transform it. They ripped things down, renovated the office and gave the place a much needed lick of paint. What had looked tired and run down started to feel like somewhere Nourish Street could actually call home.



Then the community stepped in again. People volunteered their time to help us move everything out of the house, bring it across to the warehouse and get the place set up. Boxes, supplies and donations that had taken over our home finally had somewhere they belonged.

There was something pretty special about watching people come together to help us make that move. Nourish Street had begun with our family doing what we could, but here were other people giving their own time, skills and resources because they believed in what it was becoming.



And for the first time, when we finished for the day, we could close the warehouse door and go home.

I reckon Jenny probably appreciated that part more than anyone.

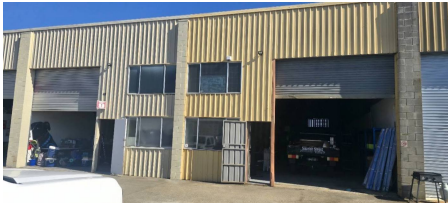
Not long afterwards, we leased the building next door and opened the Nourish Street Emporium. Donated goods could be sold affordably, with the income helping towards the costs of running the charity. It gave us another source of funding while creating another way for the wider community to support what we were doing.

As Nourish Street grew into its new home, the people around me became even more important.

Peter had originally become involved to help with grants for a couple of hours each week. Those hours quickly grew, and alongside being part of our board, he eventually became our Operations Manager. Peter became my right hand man, helping across grants, administration, logistics and the everyday problems involved in keeping things moving. A huge amount of what he does happens behind the scenes, and I am incredibly grateful for the commitment he has given Nourish Street.



Sandra's contribution also extended beyond her place on the board. She took responsibility for our bookkeeping, helping manage the financial administration, reporting and preparation for external auditing that comes with running a charity. It is work most people will never see, but it is essential.



With me, Jenny, Peter, Sandra and Kel around the board table, and different people beginning to take responsibility for different parts of the organisation, I was learning that I did not have to carry everything myself. I had started Nourish Street, but that did not mean I had every skill or every answer. Part of

leading it was learning when to trust the people around me.

There was also a much more personal reality I eventually had to confront.

By that stage I had volunteered for around two years, often working sixteen hour days. I had poured my time, energy and personal savings into Nourish Street until there was virtually nothing left financially for me to give.

But I still had a family to support.

The truth was uncomfortable to admit. In my determination to help everyone else's families, I had allowed my own family's financial wellbeing to suffer. I had emptied my savings and given almost everything I could to building Nourish Street, while Jenny was left carrying far more of the financial burden than she should have had to.



My intentions were good, but that did not change what it was costing the people closest to me. I had become so focused on helping everyone else that, financially, I had damaged the wellbeing of my own family.



Running a charity should not mean destroying your own family's financial wellbeing in order to prove how committed you are to helping somebody else's.

After around two years of working unpaid, the board made the decision that I would receive a wage for my daytime working hours. My evening outreach would remain voluntary, as it still does. It meant I could continue doing the work Nourish Street required while once again contributing financially to my own family.

As Nourish Street continues to grow, I hope we reach a position where we can employ more dedicated staff. Volunteers will always be incredibly important to what we do, but there is only so much that should reasonably be expected from people giving their time for free. More dedicated staff would allow that workload to be shared and help build something capable of

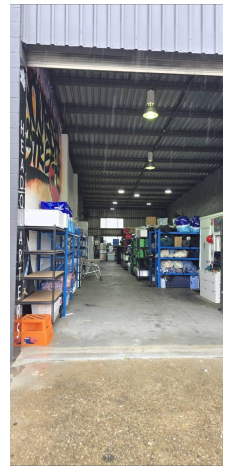
continuing long into the future.

Looking back, getting Nourish Street out of our house represented much more than finding somewhere to store donations. It gave our family its home back and gave Nourish Street a home of its own.

Nourish Street was no longer something our family had to carry alone. Other people had put their hands up, brought their skills, donated their time and believed enough in what we were doing to help build it with us.

It was becoming bigger than us.

And, thankfully for Jenny and myself it was finally out of the house.



CHAPTER 36

WHAT I BROUGHT HOME

A note before you read: These memoirs deal with addiction, homelessness, suicide, loss, trauma and some very dark periods of my life. Some details have been left out due to their deeply personal nature and to protect the privacy of others.

By early 2026, Nourish Street was growing quickly, and I wanted to understand homelessness beyond what I was seeing on our own streets. I wanted to see what other countries were facing, how communities were responding and what happened when homelessness, addiction, mental illness and extreme poverty reached levels far beyond anything I had witnessed in Australia. Reading about it wasn't enough. I wanted to see it firsthand.

I decided to travel to America and walk through some of its most notorious areas for homelessness, addiction, overdose, violence and extreme poverty. I wanted to visit shelters, meet outreach organisations and speak with the people living and working in places many tourists were warned to avoid. This trip was entirely self funded. No Nourish Street money was used to pay for it. I tried selling my motorcycles first, but had no joy. If I wanted to make the trip happen, there was really only one option left. I sold my beloved car. It wasn't an easy decision, but I believed what I could learn on the streets of America was worth more than what I was giving up.

This wasn't going to be a holiday. In March 2026, I boarded a plane with a backpack and headed for the United States. My journey would take me through Skid Row in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Kensington in Philadelphia and New York. I wasn't travelling there as an expert. I was going there to learn.

My first major stop was Skid Row in Los Angeles. Nothing could have properly prepared me for it. Skid Row covers only around fifty city blocks, yet the 2024 homeless count recorded 3,791 people experiencing homelessness there, including 2,112 living unsheltered. It was the densest concentration of homelessness in Los Angeles County. The statistics were confronting, but numbers couldn't prepare me for actually standing there.

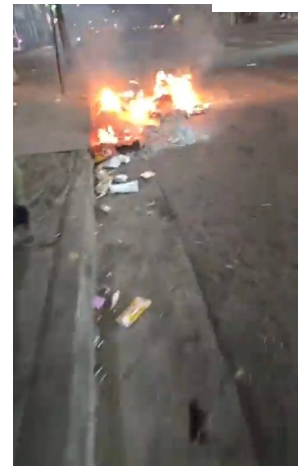


I didn't just visit during daylight hours. I walked Skid Row at two o'clock in the morning, at a time when very few outsiders would willingly walk those streets. I wore a black hoodie, kept my head low and tried not to draw attention to myself. In some strange way, it allowed me to blend in somewhat. I walked streets many people had warned me not to walk. Fires were burning in different places. I witnessed open drug use and a robbery. At one point I heard gunshots in the distance. I kept moving, constantly aware of what was happening around me.

It wasn't bravery, and I certainly wasn't bulletproof. There were probably moments when it wasn't particularly smart either. But I hadn't come to America to look at homelessness through a car window or from the comfort of a hotel room. I wanted to understand what outreach workers faced and what life could be like for the people surviving those streets every night.

The dangers facing people living there went much further than crime. Los Angeles County identifies Skid Row as having some of its highest levels of substance use, mental health crises and overdose mortality. Across the county, thousands of people experiencing homelessness have been dying each year. In 2023 alone, 2,508 people experiencing homelessness died in Los Angeles County. By 2024, their overdose mortality rate was forty six times higher than that of the general county population. Those figures were difficult enough to comprehend on paper. Walking through Skid Row gave them faces.

Yet among everything I witnessed, I also saw people refusing to give up on those streets. I visited the Midnight Mission and saw the incredible work being done there. I watched church groups come onto the streets to provide assistance.free medical assistance (wound walk)



I met outreach workers who treated people like human beings rather than problems that needed to be moved somewhere else. I also met the man known as the Mayor of Skid Row and saw people who had dedicated themselves to helping a community much of society seemed to have forgotten.

From Los Angeles I travelled to Las Vegas. Few places could demonstrate inequality more clearly. There was extraordinary wealth, enormous casinos, bright lights and money being spent everywhere. Yet away from that spectacle was another Las Vegas that many tourists would never see. Some people were living beneath the city in stormwater tunnels. I wanted to see the tunnels for myself and tried to find a way in, but I was strongly warned against entering because of the dangers involved. For once, I listened.

The dangers above ground were real as well. Las Vegas Metropolitan Police recorded ninety murders across its jurisdiction during 2025. Homelessness existed both above and below the streets, with outreach workers even entering the tunnel system beneath the city. I met an organisation working with people experiencing homelessness there. They were doing important work, although they were understandably guarded about some of what they did and where they went. Las Vegas showed me how different outreach could become depending on the environment. The needs might be similar, but the dangers and practical realities could change dramatically from one city to another.



Next came Salt Lake City, Utah. Utah had counted 4,584 people experiencing homelessness on a single night in 2025, an increase of around eighteen percent from the previous year. Salt Lake County carried a significant share of that pressure. What stood out to me there wasn't danger in the same way I had experienced it in Los Angeles. It was the response.

I met organisations working directly with people in need, including church based groups turning their beliefs into practical action. I toured a shelter and spent time looking at how services were delivered. I wasn't particularly interested in whether an organisation was religious, government funded, privately funded or grassroots. I cared about one thing. Did it actually help people?

Then I travelled to Kensington in Philadelphia. Kensington confronted me in a completely different way. I witnessed addiction openly consuming people's lives. I saw overdoses and human suffering at a level that was difficult to comprehend. These weren't scenes from a documentary or images on a news report. They were happening in front of me.

The statistics behind what I was witnessing were staggering. Philadelphia recorded more than one thousand fatal drug overdoses during 2024. The 19134 postcode, which includes part of Kensington, recorded 179 overdose deaths alone, the highest number of any postcode in Philadelphia. Fentanyl was involved in the overwhelming majority of opioid related overdose deaths across the city. Walking Kensington gave those numbers faces. People were using drugs openly. Others appeared barely conscious. Addiction, trauma, mental illness and poverty were playing out in full public view. It was difficult to comprehend how many lives were being consumed within such a concentrated area.

But Kensington also introduced me to someone I will never forget. Her name was Roz. Roz was involved with Sunshine House, and what I saw from her was compassion in action. In a place where it would have been easy to become numb to what was happening, she hadn't. She cared, she helped and she treated people with dignity.



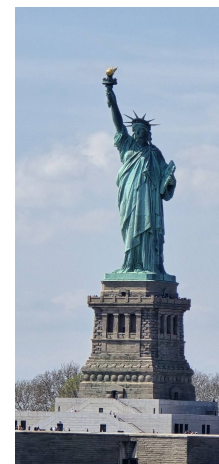
By then I was noticing something across every city I visited. The people making the greatest difference weren't necessarily those with the most authority or the biggest organisations behind them. Often they were the people prepared to turn up, build trust and help another human being without first demanding that person prove they deserved assistance.

My final major stop was New York. New York was another enormous system altogether. During the 2025 financial year, more than 86,000 people were staying in the city's homeless shelter system on an average day, while thousands more were experiencing homelessness on the streets. The death toll showed just how serious the situation had become. During that same financial year, New York City recorded more than six hundred deaths among people identified as experiencing homelessness.

There I noticed police presence and enforcement around homelessness much more strongly. At the same time, I found grassroots organisations and ordinary people trying to help those caught within the system.

By the time I was preparing to come home, America had shown me things I never wanted to see become normal in Australia. I had witnessed poverty, addiction, overdose and homelessness on a scale that was difficult to comprehend. But I had also seen extraordinary compassion in places where it would have been easy for people to stop caring. Churches, volunteers, outreach organisations and ordinary community members were stepping into enormous gaps. They were feeding people, providing shelter, reversing overdoses, building relationships and treating people with dignity.

It strengthened something I already believed. Compassion over punitive policies. You cannot punish someone out of poverty. Moving somebody from one street to another doesn't give them a home. Taking away someone's belongings doesn't create somewhere safe for them to sleep. Treating addiction only as bad behaviour does nothing to address what is happening underneath it.





There was also something I had seen during my travels that I couldn't stop thinking about. Medical care being taken directly onto the streets (wound walk) I hadn't travelled to America looking for a healthcare model. It wasn't the purpose of the trip. But when I saw medical professionals going directly to people who might otherwise struggle to access treatment, it made complete sense to me.

I thought about the people Nourish Street supported back home. People sleeping in tents, parks and public spaces who might have no transport, no phone, nowhere safe to leave their belongings or difficulty keeping appointments. Some could go months without dealing with a medical problem until it became serious. I remember thinking, why couldn't we take healthcare to them too?

For around the past year, Nourish Street has already been bringing qualified medical professionals out on our outreach vehicles. We have seen people receive wound care, medical assessments, basic treatment and referrals in the same places where we provide food and practical assistance. Now we want to take that further.

Nourish Street is currently raising funds and working through the legal, regulatory, governance and insurance requirements needed to establish a dedicated Nurse Practitioner led medical outreach van servicing Moreton Bay and Brisbane CBD. The purpose isn't to replace hospitals, GPs or existing health services. It is to bridge a gap.



A wound treated before it becomes badly infected may prevent someone ending up in hospital. A health concern identified earlier can be referred for further treatment. Someone disconnected from mainstream healthcare can be helped back into the system. Taking qualified healthcare directly to vulnerable people has the potential to improve outcomes while reducing avoidable pressure on already stretched emergency departments and other health services.

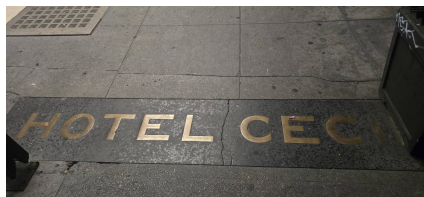
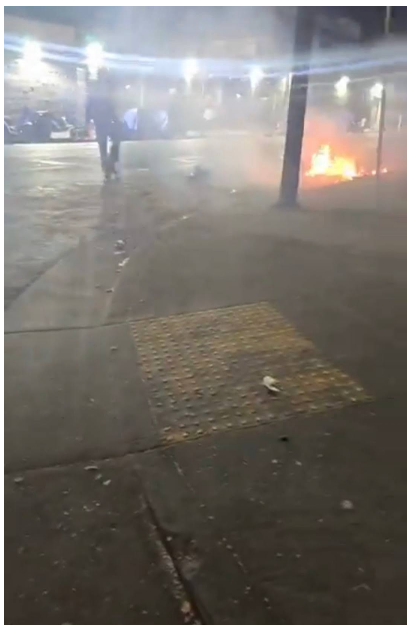
I travelled to America wanting to understand what was happening on some of its hardest streets. I saw things I hope Australia never allows to reach the same scale, and I met people whose compassion reminded me of the enormous difference ordinary human beings can make.

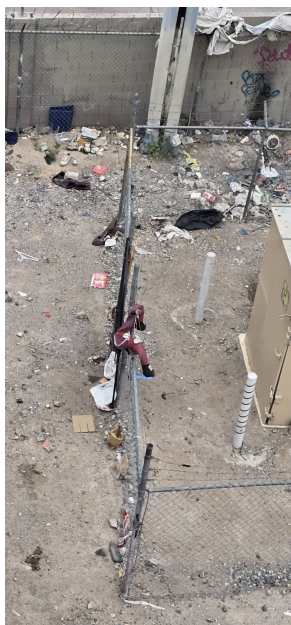
I came home with lessons I could never have learned from a report or documentary. And among them was an idea that could soon be driving through Moreton Bay and Brisbane, taking healthcare directly to people who need it most.

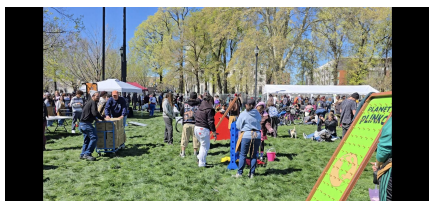
CHAPTER 36

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS

41 further photographs from Beau's American journey.

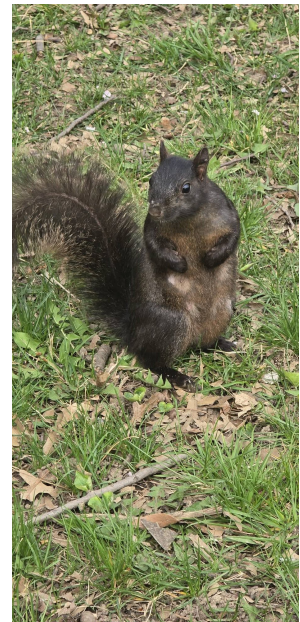














CHAPTER 37

NOURISH STREET TODAY

A note before you read: These memoirs deal with addiction, homelessness, suicide, loss, trauma and some very dark periods of my life. Some details have been left out due to their deeply personal nature and to protect the privacy of others.

Nourish Street today is a long way from those first meals being cooked at home. What began with a few people trying to help has grown into an organisation supporting hundreds of people every week across Moreton Bay, Brisbane CBD and West End. We go to people wherever possible, taking meals, tents, bedding, hygiene products and medical support directly into the parks and streets where people are living.

The increase in demand has been confronting. Nine months ago, we were supporting around 70 people across our Moreton Bay outreach and roughly the same number in Brisbane. Today, around 205 people access our Moreton Bay outreach twice a week, while another 230 to 260 people are supported across Brisbane CBD and West End every Friday night.



Chapter 37 · Photo 02

I often do those Friday night runs alongside my younger brother Ezra. Once a month, Ezra and I also turn up in fancy dress. Outreach does not always have to be serious. Sometimes our friends sleeping rough need a laugh, some fun and a moment where homelessness is not the only thing defining their night. If two grown men making fools of themselves in ridiculous costumes can put a smile on someone's face, we are more than happy to do it.

Our free Thursday night community BBQ at Suttons Beach can also bring together 100 to 160 people. It has become a place for a meal, conversation and company, where people from very different circumstances can sit together without judgement.

Behind everything Nourish Street does are around 70 active volunteers who have become the heartbeat of the organisation. They give their time and skills because they want to give something back to their community. Some help at headquarters, packing, sorting and preparing everything needed for the week ahead. Others run the op shop, head out on outreach, volunteer at our free weekly community BBQ or sell meat tray raffle tickets to help raise the money that keeps us going.

Every role matters. Not everyone wants to be out on the streets at night, and they do not have to be. There are countless jobs behind the scenes that most people will never see, but without those people doing them, our outreach vehicles would not leave headquarters loaded and ready to go. Nourish Street could never be the organisation it is today without our volunteers. They are ordinary people giving something incredibly valuable to somebody else: their time.



Chapter 37 · Photo 06

Behind those volunteers is an incredible food operation. Perfectly good food donated and rescued through Costco and SecondBite finds its way to Compassion 4 Community and other businesses and licensed kitchens, where people give their time to turn it into nutritious meals. By the time a meal reaches somebody sitting beside their tent or waiting for us on outreach, many hands may have helped get it there. Food that could have gone to waste instead becomes thousands of meals, prepared with care and handed to people with dignity.

We also work alongside countless other charities and like minded organisations. When we receive surplus food, household goods or other donated items that we cannot use ourselves, we make sure they do not stop with us. They are passed on to organisations that can get them into the hands of people in other communities who need them. I love that part of what we have built. Our impact is not limited to the people we personally meet on outreach. Something donated to Nourish Street may travel much further than we ever see, helping someone we may never meet in a community we may never visit.

Providing shelter has also become one of our largest expenses. In one year alone, Nourish Street has spent around \$80,000 on tents. For many people we support, that tent becomes their home, somewhere to sleep, protect their belongings and have some privacy from the world around them. Camping stores help by discounting tents, sleeping bags and other equipment, allowing our money to reach further.

The wider community has stepped up in ways I have never witnessed before. LJ Hooker Property Connections helps with fuel to keep our outreach vehicles moving. Even the vehicles themselves tell that story. Three of our four current service vehicles have been made possible through the Gambling Community Benefit Fund, a generous donation from a deceased estate and the support of Jade Finance. Those vehicles are now out on the road carrying food, tents, bedding and medical support every week.



Chapter 37 · Photo 12



Chapter 37 · Photo 13

Schools, groups and individuals collect non perishable food. Businesses, corporations and ordinary people donate funds that allow us to meet growing demand and expand what Nourish Street can achieve. Medical professionals take their skills directly onto the streets. To me, it is the good old spirit of Aussie mateship in action. People who may never meet each other are working towards the same purpose because they believe somebody doing it tough deserves a hand.

One of the biggest changes to our outreach has been the involvement of nurse practitioners. They can assess and diagnose many conditions, prescribe medications within their scope, treat wounds and infections, manage certain health conditions, arrange referrals and identify when someone requires urgent or specialist care. We have seen people treated under streetlights who may otherwise have continued living with an untreated medical problem.

That work has inspired our next major project, a dedicated health outreach mobile clinic. Our goal is to take professional health care directly to people experiencing homelessness and others facing barriers to traditional medical services. It is an ambitious project involving clinical governance, insurance, equipment, regulatory requirements, funding and qualified professionals, but I believe it could become one of the most important things we do.

There is another part of outreach that cannot be bought or donated: human connection.



Chapter 37 · Photo 16

Lived experience allows us to have conversations that can sometimes be difficult for traditional services to have. I understand addiction, poor choices and rebuilding because I have lived them. That does not mean my story is the same as somebody else's, but it means I can sit beside someone struggling and speak to them as an equal rather than judge them.

Thirteen people we have encouraged towards rehabilitation are now no longer living on the streets. They deserve the credit for doing the hard work themselves. We were there to encourage them towards the door when they were ready to walk through it. Of everything Nourish Street has achieved, that means an enormous amount to me.



Chapter 37 · Photo 17

Our work has also given us a responsibility to advocate. We have raised issues around punitive responses to homelessness, crisis and social housing shortages, sanitation, public health, mental health and addiction services, the treatment of people sleeping in public spaces, safety in designated camping areas and the need for genuine pathways into permanent housing. At Eddie Hyland Park in Lawnton, I played a part in bringing concerns about the treatment of people experiencing homelessness into a legal process that ultimately resulted in an important human rights decision.

Nourish Street receives no government or council funding. That makes operating harder, but it also gives us something I value enormously: independence. If government or council gets something right, I will support it. When I believe something is harming the people we see every week, I will speak up.

My voice will never be for sale.

What amazes me most about Nourish Street today is that none of this belongs to one person or one family anymore. Around us has grown a community of volunteers, charities, businesses, schools, health professionals, supporters and ordinary people who have decided they want to help.

Sometimes I look at everything happening around me and think about how far this journey has come.

There was a time in my life when I was the person who needed someone to turn up. I know what it feels like to make choices you regret and to reach a point where you cannot see much beyond the next hour. I also know what it means when another person looks past everything that has gone wrong and still sees someone worth helping.



Chapter 37 · Photo 22



Chapter 37 · Photo 23

I cannot change those years, and I would never pretend they did not happen. They are part of me. But somehow, out of some of the darkest parts of my life, something good has grown.

Today, I can stand at our headquarters and watch volunteers packing food and loading vehicles. I can see people cooking meals, running the op shop, selling raffle tickets and preparing for another night on the streets. Then those vehicles pull out carrying meals, tents, bedding and medical support to people waiting for us.



Chapter 37 · Photo 24

Sometimes I still have to remind myself where it all started.

A few meals cooked at home.

That was it.

Now hundreds of people are being supported every week, around 70 volunteers are giving their time, other charities are sharing in what we receive, health professionals are treating people on the streets, and people who once slept rough are rebuilding their lives.

But behind all those numbers are individual human beings. Someone's son or daughter. Someone's brother or sister. Someone's mum, dad or friend. Someone with a story that began long before the moment we met them on the street.

We cannot solve everything. There are nights when we drive home knowing the need was greater than what we could provide. I have had to accept that we cannot change every life we encounter.

But we can make sure we never stop seeing the person in front of us.

Maybe that is what this entire journey has taught me.



Chapter 37 · Photo 25

You do not always change someone's life with some enormous act. Sometimes it is a meal, a tent, medical care, a conversation or a laugh with two idiots dressed in ridiculous costumes. And sometimes it is refusing to walk past. I spent part of my life on the other side of the street, needing someone to see me. Today, I get to cross that street for somebody else. And I will never forget what a privilege that is.

Additional Photographs



Chapter 37 · Photo 01



Chapter 37



Chapter 37 · Ph



Chapter 37 · Ph



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Chapter 37 · Ph



Chapter 37 ·



Chapter 37 · Photo 09

Chapter 37 · Ph



Chapter 37 · Ph



Chapter 37 · Ph



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Chapter 37 · Ph

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING



A note before you read: These memoirs deal with addiction, homelessness, suicide, loss, trauma and some very dark periods of my life. Some details have been left out due to their deeply personal nature and to protect the privacy of others.

In such a short time, Nourish Street has grown far beyond my wildest imagination. I never sat down at the beginning with a plan for what it would become. We dealt with what was in front of us, listened to the people we met and tried to fill the gaps we could see. Somewhere along the way, those small steps became something much bigger.

Our next major focus is our nurse practitioner led medical outreach clinic. This is something I desperately want to see become a reality because we regularly meet people whose health has suffered while living rough. Bringing professional healthcare directly to people gives us an opportunity to reach someone before a manageable problem becomes a serious one. I look forward to the day when that clinic heads out for the first time, because behind all the planning, fundraising and hard work will be a person receiving healthcare who may otherwise have gone without it.

Beyond the clinic, I have an even bigger dream. One day I want Nourish Street to provide supported accommodation. It could begin with a duplex, a few houses or perhaps eventually a block of units. I can picture someone who has spent months or years without a secure place of their own being handed a key and knowing that, for the first time in a long time, they have some stability beneath their feet.

I do not want tents in public spaces to become the standard we simply accept. I understand why they are there, and while people have nowhere else to go I will continue supporting them with dignity. But there is a difference between recognising the reality in front of us and accepting that reality as good enough. It should never become normal for people to spend months or years living in parks because there is nowhere affordable or appropriate for them to go. We can provide the best tent, sleeping bag and meal possible, but we should still be working towards something better.

That is why I want those future keys to unlock more than a front door. My hope is to create a program with wrap around support based on the needs of each person who enters it. That could include healthcare, addi¹⁸⁰ treatment, mental health support, employment assistance, financial guidance and help navigating services. Some people may need considerable support, while others may need an opportunity, some stability and somebody in their corner while they find their feet again.

The outcome I would love to see is someone eventually walking away from Nourish Street because they no longer need us. To see a person enter during one of the hardest periods of their life and later move into permanent accommodation with greater stability, independence and plans for what comes next would mean more to me than any measure of how large Nourish Street becomes. Success should not be measured by how many people remain dependent on a service. Sometimes the greatest success is watching somebody leave it behind.

Dreams like these cannot be built on good intentions alone. They require money, planning, patience, professional people and a strong organisation underneath them. That means sustainability has to be part of every decision we make about Nourish Street's future.

We will continue spending donations carefully on the needs in front of us, but responsible stewardship also means saving for what comes next. Where we can, we need to continue putting money aside, growing our capital and building reserves. I want Nourish Street to eventually have the financial strength to invest in major projects without putting the organisation itself at risk. If an opportunity comes along to purchase property, expand a service or create something that could benefit people for decades, I want us to be in a position to act rather than watch that opportunity disappear because we never prepared for it.

There will always be immediate needs competing for every dollar we receive, and finding that balance will never be easy. But sustainability means thinking beyond this week's bills. It means protecting Nourish Street against difficult times, planning for growth and making sure the generosity people show us today can create an impact well into the future. I want the people who donate to know that their contribution may help someone tonight, but careful management can also help build something that serves people for years to come.

I want Nourish Street to grow, but I want it to grow with purpose. I do not want expansion just so we can point to another building, another vehicle or another program and say we are bigger than we used to be. Every step forward should answer a genuine need. If we eventually own accommodation, it should be because people need it. If we expand our medical services, it should be because people are missing out on healthcare. The organisation should never become more important than the people it was created to help.

Where possible, I also want us to maintain our independence from government funding, particularly if accepting funding ever comes with red tape or restrictions that compromise our ability to advocate openly. If something is failing the people we support, Nourish Street needs to be able to say so. If decisions are being made that negatively affect people sleeping rough, we need the freedom to question them. I never want us to become frightened of speaking because somebody else controls the purse strings.

There will also be projects and opportunities we have not thought of yet. Needs change, communities change and new people will come into Nourish Street with their own experience and ideas. I hope we are always listening to

Nourish Street should never be built around one person or one person's vision. It needs good people around it, a strong organisation underneath it and the ability to adapt when circumstances change.

Most of all, I want Nourish Street to outlast me. I want to know that what we are building has foundations strong enough that one day, when I am no longer the person driving it, somebody else can pick up the keys and keep moving it forward. If we do this properly, there may eventually be people helped by Nourish Street who have never heard my name. I would be perfectly happy with that. It was never supposed to be about me.

It is about the person who needs what we can provide next.

That person may need a meal tonight. Tomorrow it could be medical care. One day it might be a key to somewhere they can begin rebuilding their life. Our responsibility is to keep asking what is missing and, where we realistically can, find a way to fill that gap.

There will be setbacks. There will be ideas that fail and times when things do not go according to plan. We will learn from them, make changes when we need to and keep going.

If something in these pages has resonated with you and you would like to be part of what Nourish Street does, there are a number of ways you can help. You can give some of your time, make a donation or simply get in touch with us.

If you would like to volunteer, please email:

volunteer@nourishstreetinc.org

If you would like to donate or support our work, please visit:

Nourishstreetinc.org

If you would like to contact Nourish Street, please email:



info@nourishstreetinc.org

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And perhaps that is the right place to close this book.

For now, I am proud of what has been built and incredibly grateful to everyone who has played a part in it. Nourish Street exists because people have been willing to turn up, give their time, donate, support us and believe that something worthwhile could be built.

There is still plenty I want to achieve, but I have learned not to get too far ahead of myself. We will keep doing what we have always

done: deal with what is in front of us, listen to the people we meet and do what we realistically can to help.

That approach brought Nourish Street this far.

I think it can take us a lot further.

So I will put the pen down on this book and get back to work.

The book is finished.

The work continues.

And I'm just getting warmed up.

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.....

(i hope you have enjoyed reading my story!

For previous chapters scroll back on this page.

I hope to have the complete book available on hard copy in the near future. Beau

