

IN THE MENS

Six monologues & two duologues

**By Kieran Carroll
2/34 Keith Ave
Edithvale 3196
Melbourne
Australia
Tel: 97731210
kierancarroll@hotmail.com**

CONTENTS

1 – The Youthful Decline of Damon Dukirk	4
2 - Chops & Mobiles	9
2 – Sam & Jack	12
3 – The Jockey Who Loved Cheesecake	20
4 – The Commuter	25

INTERVAL

5 – The Haircut Agitator	31
6 – The Wanting	35
7 – Damon Dukirk Reinvigorates in Wewer, Germany	39

IN THE MENS was first performed at The Tap Gallery, Darlington from Tuesday 25th November to Saturday December 6th 2008.

Performed by Ben Maclaine & David Callan

Directed by Rob Gibson

Set design by Julia Young

Lighting Design by Daniel Alleck

The Youthful Decline of Damon Dukirk

A man wearing a singlet and boxer shorts walks out into a kitchen with an electric toothbrush in his mouth. He spits into the kitchen sink, rinses then sits at the kitchen table. A bottle of Reschs sits on the table with three bananas, one of which he begins to peel and eat.

I eat a lot of bananas, at least three a day. I've heard they're good for the potassium levels, relaxing on the bowels.

I don't do too much anymore. Most afternoons I'm outside a little bakery with its single table. The mood is unperturbed, unhurried, satisfied perhaps. It's only a few hundred metres walk to the ocean. I like being next to the fruit shop. People look calm when they're choosing fruit.

For ten years I wrote with an insane and profound energy: stories, novels and three volumes of obscure but technically stimulating verse which had the critics slurping up their inflated minestrone. The imaginative and autobiographical well was bottomless; at times a festering pit, at other times a serene lagoon. I didn't need to sleep much. I could drink, party, then push on with the work next morning. Then, I'd balance the ledger with a swim or a six k jog. Women seemed to like me then too. I had four or five phone numbers and all were willing to drink the night away with me and wind up in my bed.

When did the daily storms begin? When did the minestrone grow cold? Four summers ago. A string of brutal reviews for my third book of poems, one proclaiming I was 'an obsessed upper class trivia merchant who wouldn't recognize a hamburger from a sausage...' The publisher rang and said the book had only sold four copies, all bought

by the same person, and did I know him?

I thought a bath might relax me. Then, the phone rang three more times, each time a girlfriend announcing a desire for a monogamous, lifetime commitment from a well earning man. That term *well earning* - the imbalance of it!

Then the hammer blow - a critic: an evil, bitter, brains and bacon eating, stout and whisky drinking misery goat. Someone who even in my good days never wrote a valuable word but just poured his cynical vitriol out to the gullible intelligentsia. A seething mess of failed creativity. A black and damp spirit hovering around the newspapers and publishing houses of this two headed little province. Ladies and Gentlemen - let us usher in that repressed little snot rag Mr. Burnt Buttocks.

'Dukirk, Dukirk, Dukirk, Dukirk!' he roared.

He was enjoying this. Oh how he was enjoying this.

'It's all over for you Dukirk, just like I said it should have been eight years ago. This place knows you for the faker you are, the cut and paste pastiches of your limp brain. No publisher will go near you again, no newspaper could take you seriously, no opinion you have matters. You're 29 and you're headed one way Dukirk - to the longest stay in a nursing home that any writer in this province has ever known. I wouldn't even give you a library card or a fresh loaf of bread Dukirk. If I was your newsagent, I'd ban pens. If I was your parents, I'd demand you only say *thank you* and *goodnight* given the way you've brutalized the language. Welcome to failure, Dukirk. I hope you enjoy your stay.'

Trouble was, this time, everybody agreed with him.

My thoughts turned to alcohol. I needed a drink and with those first few sips alcohol started working on me differently. Where only days before it had been full of happy ritual, careless couch posturing and bedroom frivolity, it now began to make me irritable, maudlin and woefully nostalgic. I began frequenting a 24 hour hotel called *The Grumbling Arms* full of recently released jailbirds, prostitutes and drunk businessmen. This place was so hamstrung for a good time that instead of a jukebox, the publican just played *Radio For The Print Handicapped*.

It didn't end there. I thought nightclubs might be the answer. Nightclubs - to dance the gloom right out of the system. I went around them all from the chic to the beyond tragic looking for cheap drink deals and a woman to reassure me.

Reassure - I lost the meaning of that word a long time ago.

One night I wound up with a twenty-six year old two time divorcee on some fake windmill estate, and in the morning, I was hopping fences to get away from her ex-husband. My brother's nicknamed me the *roadrunner* ever since.

I decided age was no barrier. I headed back to the clubs of my youth where not surprisingly no one looked at me. I drank what the kids looked to be drinking, mimicked their dance manouevres. I soppily told girls that they would have loved me if they'd met me ten years earlier.

I headed the other way into a world of forty-something desperation, of terrible cover

bands, of bald men with shattered egos sitting at high tables where five hours would pass and they wouldn't move.

It got worse. I got so drunk one night I read a couple of pages of Dicken's *Hard Times* to a topless dancer and received a broken nose from a bouncer who was a huge Dickens fan. I ate millions of tasteless hot-dogs outside band venues to the memory of old friends who'd moved with their partners and children to pleasant suburbs. I was on a torturous mission through the seedy depravity of my own soul. I wanted the easy joy of early adulthood. But hey, underneath it all, I'm a sensible man. I woke up one afternoon and I was exhausted, ill and fat. If I couldn't get my brain right, at least I had to take care of my body.

So over the past four years while my contemporaries flew through a world of festivals, on-line chats and editorial meetings, I've lived in absurd simplicity.

I started waking each morning trying to decide how many Weet-Bix I should eat, guessing the exact minute the hard rubbish would be collected, taking bus trips to the end of lines to count how many brands of toothbrushes they kept in their supermarkets, mowing other people's lawns when they weren't home and when they didn't need mowing anyway! One week, I watched four days straight of the bitchiest mid-week ladies' tennis I could find.

You may think I was going completely crazy at this point too. I wasn't. It's just that I couldn't see the point in continuing on with anything literary, and therefore, my other artistic pleasures like listening to records or watching films evaporated. It all seemed part

of the same conspiracy. I was sick of art. I didn't have a trade or like sport, or feel like studying anything.

I suppose you're thinking that 33 isn't old, that I've got an abundance of time. True but it's a difficult concept to consider living another fifty years and feel that I've completed my best work at the only thing I ever really wanted to do. Like a famous sportsman perhaps. People say you're far too young for this to happen... but so many people never get close again to the magic of their early work. They keep on doing it and their later stuff just takes on an air of sad inconsequence. Look at Echo & The Bunnymen. Only one truly beautiful moment, *Nothing Lasts Forever* in all their comeback material. Look at Morrissey. Look at Christopher Isherwood. Wrote *Cabaret* and had the future of the English novel in his hands in his 30s, kept writing and was seen as only mildly important in his 60s. Some of them know it but what else can they do?

Am I a self-pitying twit? Why don't I just go off and work for a charity organization, enrol in the army, find a job on a farm, head for a monastery. Well, the truth is, lots of people think of these things at one stage or another in their lives but very few have the strength to do it. No. When I appraise all of my days, my really happy moments were after a good session of writing. I could face the world with a clear lightness.

Chops & Mobiles

A man wears neat pants, black shoes, a business shirt and tie with the top button undone. Throughout the conversation he is eating from a pack of PK chewing gum. He has two mobile phones, one that he conducts the conversation with, the other that he looks at from time to time in a quizzical and interested fashion. He walks up and down a train station platform at morning peak hour.

MAN: No, no, no, no, no, you listen. I'm not like that, there's no way, Thea, don't be stupid, don't be an idiot. *(long pause)* What, what are you saying? I don't even know Mikalia. You need a holiday, what, I'm at the train station, oh I don't know, ten minutes, look we'll meet up tonight and have a few drinks. I'll pay. I've got some money. Wear whatever you like. Will you forget her? I hardly even know her. *(long pause)* How many people have I had sex with? Why do you want to know that right now? Thea, calm down, just calm down alright. How long have we been together? Three years, three years right and you're still thinking I'm sleeping with other women behind your back. *(long pause)* Oh stop going on about her, we didn't even know if we were together then, we hadn't made up our minds. *(long pause)* She wasn't the one who kept hanging up every time you picked up the phone. Thea, just forget it, Thea, where are you going now? To the supermarket. Can you get me some chops? I'm starting footy training this week. I gotta eat some meat. We'll have a few drinks tonight but I gotta cut it back. *(long pause)* Whattya mean ya don't want me eating meat. You got your beliefs and I got mine. I like chops. They keep me strong. Jesus Christ Theadora. Just go to the supermarket and get me the chops! That's all I was asking for. A fuckin chop and don't make it pork. Of course, I'll pay for them. Why would I expect you to pay for my chops? Thea, you're always asking me that, about getting married. Yeah yeah I do, you

know that. Why? (*deep sighs*) I know your parents want a wedding and grandkids. What's the rush with your family? Your father's a fascist. How the hell is it ever gonna work with him? Well, he is a fascist Thea. (*long pause*) Mikalia tried to, now hold on, a kiss one night and you know, well, I didn't stick the tongue in. Thea, let's not go on about it, she's in Cairns or somewhere. Thea, Thea, you're fuckin' hysterical. What's wrong with you? I'm sick of your bitching about every little thing. (*long pause, exasperated*) What do you mean I sit around all day scratching myself, yeah sure, there, yeah yeah, I know I'm never offering to mop the floor, yeah but, look, alright I'll do more house work, this train's running late, why is it ...mmm mmm...oh for Christ's sake, the chops at Safeway haven't got too much fat on them, why are you fighting me over a couple of chops, we're not talking sausages. Look do you reckon there's any great sportsmen or women, in any sport, who are vegetarians? Look I'll see you tonight all right, we'll talk some more then, yeah yeah eight o'clock (*long pause*) Oh fuck that, I'm not visiting your drug addict cousin or whatever she is in Miranda. (*pause*) What are you on? What do you mean I fantasize about other women all the time. Oh God. Why don't you take up Tai-Chi or something to relax? What do you spend your time thinking about? Why don't you go off and read a book and stop all this paranoia...mmm...yeah yeah, I know I forgot to redirect the mail and for the last time Mikalia isn't texting me. (*looks at other phone and notices a message*) Christ we're going around in circles. She's in Cairns, Cairns, 3000km from Rockdale, yes yes, she had cracked lips, does it matter, I didn't stick my tongue! Dora, for Christ's sake, shut up, you're driving me crazy. (*long pause*) All right, c'mon then, come down now, forget the chops, forget my meat intake and come down here now. I'll wait. Let's have it out here. I'm not moving. You want to end it. You want us to break up because, because what, I want to keep eating chops, I

called your father a fascist and I had the worst half-kiss with some woman whose lips were like a dry footpath. You're mad. You know what I reckon, well I reckon this isn't all about me. I reckon you're seeing someone new, am I right, am I right? I've seen that American show, what's it called, *Cheaters*, about people going behind each other's backs and you've (*long pause*) how would I know what you get up to during the day, you could be in bed with the local fire brigade for all I know. Theadora, we're not breaking up, it's insane. We are not breaking up do you hear me? We're not. We're just not. We'll talk some more tonight. Yeah of course I'll be alone, who do you think I'm going to be bringing – Pamela Anderson? Christ, look the train's coming now. Thea, Thea I didn't mean to be smart, don't, don't Thea, I'm warning you, Thea, Thea, don't don't, oh Jeezus, what do you want, what do you want from me, this is fuckin crazy, Christ here's the train, I'm getting on, you better turn up tonight (*becoming manic*) yes, yeah, Thea no no no no no no no, right I'm coming home, I'm calling in sick, that's it, I'm outta here, we're over if that's the way you want it. Look the credit's just about to go on the phone, Thea, Dora, Theadora. (*Train announcement can be heard.*) I can't believe it. It's a fuckin' express to Sydneham! Jeezus I only need to get to Tempe!

Blackout

Sam & Jack

A gay couple. Evening. Sam is staring out the window while Jack sits on the couch looking at some paperwork. Both are dressed in formal work clothes though Sam looks slightly disheveled while Jack is very neat. A take-away pizza box sits on the floor.

SAM: I can't believe we bought out here.

JACK: Let's not go through this again. I've got a really full on day ahead at work tomorrow.

SAM: I mean, I've never lived south of Erskineville.

JACK: Well this is Rockdale.

SAM: I know where we are.

JACK: You know we did this because this is what we could afford right now. It doesn't necessarily mean forever.

SAM: I would have preferred a smaller place closer to the city. God, I would have preferred a bigger mortgage.

JACK: That's really practical.

SAM: There's no bars. I saw that pub in Kogarah by the station the other day. That'd be good for a pool cue in the eye.

JACK: What is this?

SAM: It's okay for you. You've got family around the corner. You like swimming and you work in Hurstville. It's pretty cushy.

JACK: Why are you starting on this now?

SAM: You know I thought by the time my twenties were up I'd be...

JACK: Working overseas...

SAM: No in Paddington or somewhere. But oh no, squeezed out by market forces...

JACK: Your chardonnay socialist dreams got squashed.

SAM: Don't be stupid.

JACK: Well stop complaining. It's a lovely house. We've got Botany Bay. I love the garden, the neighbours are pretty friendly. I like that 55% of the City of Rockdale is from a non-English speaking background. And the grocery shopping is so much cheaper. I think the Rockdale Fruit Market is half the price of where we used to shop. I like being away from traffic (*pacifying the situation*) and waking up to just the sound of you breathing.

SAM: Alright, alright. (*long pause*) What I mean is...

JACK: What?

SAM: We had dreams of doing other things before this, didn't we? I mean - you haven't even been overseas.

JACK: Maybe I don't want to travel.

SAM: Don't be defensive.

JACK: Not everybody needs the big European tour.

SAM: It's not that, it's about...

JACK: About what?

SAM: Life experience I suppose.

JACK: What a...

SAM: I don't mean to be offensive. I mean I kind of...well, I've done it as well, like fitting a time-line any parent would approve of: finish school, go to uni, go to work for a few years, save a deposit, buy a house, da da da, start a family, get the superannuation rolling in etc etc etc...

JACK: Stop it! You're making it sound so depressing. And, so far, it hasn't been depressing at all.

SAM: All I meant was, you know...

JACK: I know what you meant.

SAM: I'm sure I wanted financial security as well but I think we've taken it too far too soon. Look Jack, I don't want to be putting in sixty hour weeks for an IT company just to pay off something in Rockdale that in the 70s would have cost only a couple of years wages. I wish we'd never done it. It's boring. I'm sick of it already. I can see the future.

I'm going to wind up a dirty old man leering at Greek boys on Sundays in Brighton Le Sands!

He walks away. There is a long silence.

JACK: Is that how you really feel?

SAM: I just get...

JACK: You bastard. You've said enough.

(Long pause)

JACK: I don't know why you're saying all this now. I thought you were happy with what we've done. *(pause)* I just don't have stars in my eyes like...

SAM: I'm just tired of all the planning, the organization...

JACK: Gee what a hassle.

SAM: And I've got something else to tell you, something that's been on my mind for a couple of days. *(long pause)* I quit my job. I gave them two weeks notice. I was going to tell you last night. I didn't quite know how to break it to you. I...

JACK: You're mad. Just when we've put ourselves in for all of this, you quit your job. What are you going to do?

SAM: Not sure yet, something with less stress.

JACK: And I'm going to support us am I, while you sit at home and decide how to lead a stress free existence?

SAM: I might just do some laboring or something.

JACK: You just can't walk out on things because they're getting a bit stressful. Everybody has some stress, I mean, it's part of working, living...

SAM: Does it have to be?

JACK: What's the point of all this now? You should have worked all this out ages ago. You're not nineteen.

SAM: That's right. People can't change in your world, can they? They have to follow a line and if they don't follow that line or they're a bit indecisive or they're not working the required hours then they're failing or they're doing themselves a disservice.

JACK: That's not true. You just can't walk out on things and expect me to be supportive and understanding.

SAM: I want free weekends. I'm not getting all hippie and new age about it but I want to stop. Don't worry about the money.

JACK: Right. I'm going over to Mum's before this really gets out of hand. You've done a really stupid thing.

SAM: Yeah right, go and have a moan to her over a cup of tea and a couple of valium overlooking the St. Georges River! Christ, it's not like I'm saying let's live in a tent on raw vegetables. Fuckin' hell.

Jack departs. Sam sits at the table. He then departs.

Blackout.

Next Morning.

SAM: Hi.

JACK: Hi. *(Long pause)* You needed to say something earlier Sam. You saved and put a lot of money into this as well. And I was keen to buy, sure, but it's not like I had...

SAM *(bluntly)*: I don't think I'm in love with you anymore.

JACK: Sorry. What did you just say?

SAM: It's not the house or where we've bought or worrying about kids or the finances or even my job. I can handle all that, that's not a problem...but I don't feel like I'm in love with you, not like I was before.

JACK: Well you've really dug a hole for yourself then haven't you? I should be feeling devastated but I'm not actually, I'm not, I'm just looking at you and I feel nothing but pity for you. You're pathetic. I knew what I wanted and what I was working for and I've been able to do it. You don't know what you've been working for. How long Sam, how long have you felt this way, that you didn't feel in love with me? How long?

SAM: You want me to be honest?

JACK: Yeah, be honest. I can take another punch. How long?

SAM: About a year.

JACK: Right.

SAM: Yeah, I think so.

JACK: Well, that's just great. Well done. Kept the peace well didn't you?

SAM: I...

JACK: Do you know what you've just said?

SAM: You asked for honesty. Maybe we can work things out.

JACK: Work things out!

SAM: Yeah.

JACK: And how are we going to do that Sam? Have you got some quick solution? You don't think I haven't sensed you were turning away from me, all the times you've turned your back to the wall and just rolled over to sleep pretending that life had become so hectic. Do you think I'm stupid? Don't you think I need a bit more than that sort of treatment. You don't know how much I hoped things would change. I was too scared and now it seems far too stupid to say anything.

SAM: I've got an idea. You'll probably think it's crazy.

JACK: I don't want to hear anything more from you.

SAM: Well I was thinking, well, we could try it for just for a little while anyway, and if it doesn't work out...

JACK: What?

SAM: How about getting one or two more people to move in with us, like a share-house idea, I mean, the place is big enough?

JACK: Don't be stupid. I'm not sharing this place with strangers.

SAM: We've got two spare bedrooms. Maybe, another couple or one guy, one girl? It'll pay the mortgage off more quickly, wouldn't it? *(pause)* What do you think?

JACK: So that's going to save everything is it?

SAM: It might just ease things a bit, make things a bit more fun. I know it seems like a backward step or something but it wouldn't hurt to try...

JACK: But we've already lived like that...

SAM: I know we have but we liked it for the most part, didn't we?

JACK: I was always left to sort out the bills.

SAM: I'll do it this time. I just thought maybe we could go back, just for a little bit to the way things used to be. I'll look for a new job and you know I've wanted to leave the old one for ages. I'm not going to hang around the house all day. I'll get it sorted out. Anyway, this idea came into my head and I thought maybe it could work. People cooking dinner for each other, someone always around to have a drink with, just a bit more social interaction so everything's not just you and me...

JACK: Don't you think it's just avoiding the problem? We won't be in your share-house paradise when we're fifty.

SAM: I think it's a way of working through things.

JACK: Sam, you say you're not in love with me.

SAM: What about Lisa, she's looking for a new place to live? We both get on well with her. And also, I thought of Simon, you like him well enough.

JACK: Sam, you're not in love with me. You're avoiding the point.

SAM: I had to say that so we know where things stand. It doesn't mean...

JACK: You know when you're really in love with somebody. You always make the time to call. It doesn't matter how busy the day is and then you plan something, to meet, even if it's only for half-an-hour, no matter how many other things are happening... because you both have to see each other. It becomes first priority and everything else works around it. When you're trying to be in love, but aren't really, you don't feel that bad if something's cancelled or gets put off for a few days.

SAM: You're right. I know. I remember how I always called when we first started going out.

JACK: You don't think I can tell the difference between the last two years and the first two? You never call from work these days and then I started not calling you and then we started landing back at home of a night with you thinking that you've made the greatest mistake of your life! I don't want any of your short-term solutions...

SAM: Will you think about it at least?

JACK: Will you work out...

SAM: Let's leave it Jack, that's enough for now. We shouldn't go on. We've never been screamers at one another. I've said an incredibly harsh thing. I know I have. You know I can be blunt.

JACK: Why couldn't you be upfront? It wasn't my job to bring things out in the open.

SAM: I never felt angry and spiteful towards you. I just started to feel, not love or hate, something in the middle, where you can go on with that person but all the tingles have gone. I don't know how to explain it. Everything just seems to go mild and you remember back when you had all this energy for it. I overheard a word on the train the other day 'zeal', and that's it, when you love with zeal and I'm really sorry but I lost it.

JACK: Do you want it back with me?

SAM: Of course I do. I want to be in love with you. We just need to figure a new way. I haven't got the right answers for that yet.

JACK: I can't turn into somebody else Sam.

SAM: I'm not asking that. I suppose all I'm asking is that we don't fret about all the day-to-day stuff.

JACK: I'm a worrier.

SAM: Well I haven't helped.

JACK: I wish you would improve your cooking.

SAM: I will. I will. I promise.

JACK: That Jamie Oliver book has sat over there in its brown paper bag for three years. Even if you burn things, it doesn't matter. I'd just like you to try.

SAM: Okay.

JACK: I'll try to get rid of 'worry'.

SAM: Okay, see we've made a start.

JACK: I might have a couple of Mint Slices from the fridge.

SAM: I'll make us a hot chocolate, hey?

JACK: Okay. I need to get to sleep.

SAM: Okay. Well let's do that.

JACK: Okay.

SAM: Stop saying okay.

JACK: Do you think Sam, somebody else might have smashed up the place by now considering what you just told me?

SAM: Possibly, I've known a couple of furniture chuckers. Bart was a shocker.

JACK: You better take the couch tonight. I don't know what to think. I really don't. I think I really hate you now...and the worst thing is, in the morning, I probably won't.

SAM: Jackie...

JACK: You're a liar Sam, a big fat liar...and I'm a fuckin' fool.

Lights fade slowly to black.

The Jockey Who Loved Cheesecake

A dancefloor. To one side a bar with a high stool. Rocket Ronnie Smithen is in his riding silks under disco lights. He is dancing and remembering. The song Rhythm Of The Night plays softly underneath him.

The second wife's six foot three. The night we first met she was wearing jeans and a floppy shirt. I was rollickin' around after a few too many and I said to her as we moved closer to one another: 'Here you go shirtlifter'. I lifted up her shirt and planted a big kiss on her navel. I realized pretty quickly I would have needed a step-ladder to get any further! She couldn't believe it, couldn't stop laughing. We became an item. One of the tallest women in Melbourne dating Rocket Ronnie Smithen.

'Ronnie, when you next go to Hong Kong to ride, I'm coming for the shopping,' she announced, one deplorable muddy morning after trackwork. I told her that Hong Kong's unlikely but Tassie's on the card although I warned her how I always get in trouble down the Apple Isle. One time, I needed to go to the toilet and a school group had formed a big line to use the public facilities. While in the line, a teacher came up to me and asked: 'Little boy, are you with the Grade 3s or the Grade 4s?'

'Madam,' I courteously replied, 'I completed Grade 3 a long time ago and I need to have a piss because I'm riding in the sixth!'

I've never had to worry about my weight much. I've had beer hangovers that would keep a tall man in bed a week. I've eaten whole cheesecakes in one sitting – for breakfast.

Music stops. He moves off the dancefloor to his bar.

I start the day with strong black coffee and a cigar. The second wife keeps the

coffee on the highest shelf to stop me having too many cups. Six feet three hey? I know men who don't like the idea of looking up to a woman but I've never had a choice. And besides, if I can't charm them in the height department, I can charm them elsewhere! After that first night of kissing her navel, her friends nicknamed me *Shirtlifter*.

'Who's the hot tip at Flemington tomorrow, Shirtlifter?'

'Ever pulled a horse Shirtlifter?'

Commentators got a hold of it.

'And the Shirtlifter's in a lot of trouble three deep.'

'The Shirtlifter's bringing home the mare with ease, hands and heels, an easy win.'

I started not even introducing myself as Rocket Ronnie. I'd just say 'Call me Shirtlifter'.

They've even mounted a little plaque at the local - *Shirtlifter's Corner*.

A few months after meeting the second wife, rumours went around that I wasn't riding my mounts as hard as I could, that I was getting a bit of mula under the table. Two fly by night visits to Brisbane for a couple of chicken feed races didn't help. Did I take a bit under the table? Well, cheesecake isn't getting any cheaper and the new wife liked shopping at the expensive end of town. Anyway, there was an enquiry and I got rubbed out for six months, my reputation shot. I had nothing to do but go to the bar. One night the second wife stormed in and pushed a cheesecake into my face before yelling:

'It's over Shirtlifter. You're getting fat and I'm seeing a basketballer. He's gonna make it in the USA which sounds alright to me. In Tassie, they still think you're in Grade 3.'

Talk about throwing a good story back at a broken man but I kept my humour and quipped: 'But I bet he can't kiss your navel like I can. It'd do his neck in!'

She poured a beer over my head and left.

He returns to the dancefloor. What A Night by Frankie Vallie plays.

That's racing. It's a gamble. If she wanted security, she should have married a fireman! During the rub out, I began thinking seriously about cheesecake. My own business. A shop for people who loved racing and desserts. Plenty of cake and talk. I thought if I could just get back in the saddle, make some quick money then get out, I'd be set...

Shirtlifter's Café.

When the ban lifted I got on the phone. Two hard years I told myself. I had to ride in the bloody country to begin with: Casterton, Moe, Echuca, Murtoa, you name it, Rocket Ronnie Smithen was up early and getting there in the name of getting out. No cheesecake, no beer, early nights, available any day or night of the week. Like an apprentice.

Music stops. He moves into the audience, shaking hands with people.

I had some respect to win back. Old blokes in the country shook my hand and said they never thought they'd see Rocket Ronnie on the track again. Old bastards forgive easily. I started telling a few stories on the radio to win back a few punters like the time I rode in Sydney and I forgot they ran around the other way so the horse missed the race because I couldn't find the barrier in time. Or how I always keep a collection of whips under the bed for when the first wife comes around for my money.

'Good on ya Ronnie,' they started saying. 'Good to have you back'.

The winners started coming in. Some trainers with better horses started calling; rides in the city with half a chance. I could feel my luck changing. I even sat in saunas to lose more weight. The second wife rang and said it didn't work out with the basketballer and would she consider a trial reunion. I said yeah and bring the bloody furniture! The night she came back to the house, we danced to *Lady In Red*.

Music starts as he grabs a woman from the audience.

I held her tight.

'Kiss my navel like you used to Shirlifter,' she whispered.

As I took off her clothes, I told her my shop would sell the largest cheesecakes in the southern hemisphere, possibly the world.

'I want to try for a little Ronnie or Rhonda,' she whispered even more sultrily.

Well the Shirlifter began trying harder than a Melbourne Cup that night. My head was a whirl of possibilities: big winners, big cheesecakes, medium sized kids.

Music stops. Long pause.

Then a call came through from Honkers. A pulling job. \$30,000 bucks. My reputation was clean again. I'd worked hard to get back, but jeezus, thirty grand. That's a lot of bloody winners in Horsham! It was get out quick money. Money for the cheesecake business. A ten hour flight, five minutes on the track and home again. Money to help the family on the way. If I was caught, that would be the end of me for sure. But I wanted out anyway, didn't I? But did I want to be remembered like that, because at my best, I could really ride, as good as Beadman or Oliver, or my all-time favourite Handbrake Harry White?

I couldn't sleep that night. Next morning, I rang the trainer and said I'd do it. On the plane, I was sweating like a bloke holding drugs in his gut looking over Bangkok. Paranoid as all get out and I hadn't done anything yet. Funny how once I didn't care too much and now I was thinking about all the people who were honestly going to back this horse thinking it could win; how they may as well just throw their money in the bin. I had more guilt than a Catholic priest at a brothel. At the airport, the connections were waiting for me. I deliberately went slow through customs. Then in the line, I said this is no way to

go out. They went berserk when I said I wouldn't do it. The trainer had to be held back by airport security. I ran to the Qantas counter and said first flight back to Melbourne. I rang Jack Musgrave and said I'd be right for Geelong on Tuesday. Thirty grand gone begging. Ah, let some other mug sweat on it. The Hong Kong authorities are onto it all now. I don't fancy jail with thirteen Chinese blokes pissing in the bowl before me. Every race gets televised...the bloody scrutiny. It's not like the wet foggy days of old when not even the people on the course could see what was happening down the back straight.

On the plane home, I was a relieved, happy man. I watched a film with Eddie Murphy in it and drank like an Australian cricket team going to England in the 70s. When the evening meal came around, I saw that the dessert was a little piece of cheesecake. Blueberry. Cold. Light. Just the ticket. I rammed a couple more beers down the back of the throat and then I took that piece of cheesecake in my fingers and swallowed the lot in a whole go. Bloody beautiful. Then I said to myself. Another hard year of riding Shirtlifter. Honest riding, honest money, go out on a high where the public will give you a clap and then start the business - the biggest, best value cheesecakes in the southern hemisphere, possibly the world! I fell asleep and woke to it pissing down at Tullamarine. It's going to be a dead track in Geelong, I thought to myself, as I gave the air hostesses a goodbye wink.

The Commuter

1

Lights up. Bright white light. Morning, 7am, Geelong Rd. Gavin Crawford, mid 30s and slightly overweight is dressed in a blue business shirt with black tie and black suit pants. He sits on a chair, his right arm outstretched as if holding the wheel of a car.

Gavin Crawford – third generation Melbourne suburban. Part of a generation who has decided to pack it in and move to the coast, in my case, the West Coast, Torquay or as surfies at school used to call it *Talkers*.

After a long week in the office, I can't believe it on a Saturday morning when I wake up and hear the surf. Like a dream. Like a holiday every weekend.

Haven't met any of the locals though. A year, and still haven't made it to the public bar. Don't know if I want to anyway; old grouches like my father, piss-pot perfectionists. Not that I can't be an opinionated bastard.

Jane, my wife, tells me that now I'm away from the city that I've got to loosen up. 'Gav,' she says, 'we've got all we need: this beautiful house, some share investments, money for holidays, the kids are healthy and happy.'

And she's right, but something nags at me, wakes me up in the middle of the night. I thought the country would relax me – and it does, I suppose – but now I'm getting up earlier and getting home later. I'm a stockbroker and I wonder, despite everything, if that's enough. I mean, materially it is, but what I'm getting at is, that given my opportunities, my upbringing, the chances placed before me, have I made enough of myself? Have I done and seen enough? It's almost as if a comfortable lifestyle overtook ambition. It's just that over the last five years, I've hit a wall where I don't think in terms

of climbing the ladder. I take home my hundred grand – but what happened to the days when I was thinking seven hundred?

I've actually been thinking about ditching the driving, taking the car to Geelong station and getting on the train. Every Christmas, I get a novel or biography from Jane's side of the family and do you think I ever get around to them? I try the weekend papers but usually half-way through an article I fall asleep on the couch. I blame the commuting. Jane's happy down here. She's got a little business as a podiatrist. Perfect. Three days a week while the kids are at school. The kids love it too, but what kid wouldn't? I get angry when they sit around playing Nintendo or watching TV. They've got paradise on their doorstep. I just have to keep reminding them. Sometimes, I think I should drive them around some Melbourne high-rises. God, they can whinge.

In the mornings, when I'm pulling the car out of the driveway, I wonder about it all. I look at the nearby houses, and I don't notice anyone else awake. I think about chucking in the city job, going into real estate down here, financial planning, maybe even running a bar; surrender some money for time. And then I think exactly the opposite. How I want mentions in the financial pages, my name in big city lights! Who was it that said to me: 'You can't run the world from a country town.' In my 20s, I thought Melbourne was too small for me or would eventually become so. I saw New York, London, at the very least Sydney, a North Shore mansion and a couple of Jags.

What the fuck are we all thinking as we drive up here morning and night? How many of us think it's the best move we ever made? How many of us wish we could return to the 8.09 City Loop? I used to like to go to the footy or the races some Saturdays. Seems too far now. Ah, I've heard Jane on about the distance, not being able to visit certain shopping strips. Gee, we can be whingers, can't we?

Blackout

2

Return drive, night. Lights change to a blue wash. Gavin pulls at his tie to loosen it and limply holds his left arm out across the wheel.

Some nights, I struggle to stay awake. I have those moments when my head almost goes down, saliva fills my mouth and even the wheel veers slightly left or right. I read the signs *Drowsy Drivers Dry* but I don't pull over. I just open the windows right up and turn on the radio.

Twenty to nine. Fuck, gotta be back there by seven. Might pick up a pizza in Geelong. I reckon how you feel about commuting has a lot to do with whether you did any as a kid. What I mean is that I can remember the ones who'd be catching two trains from some outer suburb and they probably had a mile walk to the station before that, and once they got through after school sport, they probably didn't get home until 7.30, and then you had those other kids who had it made, who lived in a mansion nearby and just walked across the ovals or even snuck home for lunch. I reckon the non-commuters then are probably the non-commuters now. They're probably still in Kew or Hawthorn or Ivanhoe working from home. But the boys who did it tough early, are probably still doing it tough now.

A couple of months ago, I ran into an old school mate, Steve Callander. 'How are you Steve?' I asked pretty casually. Jesus, he looked at me pretty fiercely before saying: "Gav, I'm exhausted. Every morning it seems to be getting harder to get out of bed. My back's stiff, work's crazy and I'm awake at night, tossing around, getting up, pacing the kitchen, worrying, worrying over the stupidest things and I'm doing all this in Torquay! Left the city to try and forget work, to put some distance between me and it. And now,

I'm worrying more because I'm further away from it and haven't been going into the office on weekends. My mobile calls have doubled. Our fathers just clocked in and clocked off. They didn't forego the after work beer. It didn't always do them a lot of a good but why can't we get back to that?"

I looked at Stevey and he looked at me and we stared at each other for a moment like a couple of heavyweights...and then we started to laugh, and we couldn't stop, and we were laughing so hard and it wasn't even funny, I mean it wasn't fucking funny at all but both our guts were hurting and our eyes were watering on this sticky bench in the Bourke St Mall rolling around like a couple of kids who'd landed a water-bomb onto a teacher and got away with it. And when we finally settled down, and got our breaths back, Stevey said to me: "Why can't we Gav, why can't we just – clock off?"

I didn't go back to work that day. I rang in sick. Stevey did the same. We went down to Young and Jacksons for a couple of quick ones and then we took the train back to Geelong with a hip flask of rum. Then we rang our wives, told them to grab the kids, cancel whatever was going on and to meet us at Corio Bay for a barbecue. Stevey and I bounded through the supermarket like we'd just had our first fuck.

5.30 on a Wednesday night. Some six packs of Steinlager, Stevey and I sharing cooking duties. Stevey's wife Prue bought a beautiful blueberry cheesecake and the two families who didn't even know that morning that they were living near each other, were now having a great time together; the kids playing a big game of cricket, not one of them wearing shoes.

For that afternoon, I forgot everything that I was trying to work out, forgot everything completely and just sat and talked and drank and hugged Jane and admired the kids and watched the sun go down with an old school mate who's going through the same

things as me. It seemed for that moment, the best thing I'd done in years. And maybe, it is.

Lights begin to fade.

Blackout.

INTERVAL

The Haircut Agitator

A man in his early 50s is sitting on a chair reading a form guide. Beside him is an empty barber's chair. A man in his mid 30s enters, neatly dressed. His hair does not look in need of cutting.

B: G'day mate. C'mon in.

The man sits down. Long pause.

B: Got the day off have ya?

Long Pause. The barber looks slightly agitated.

B: Are you deaf mate? I asked you if you had the day off?

M: Barbers always ask that.

B: Righto. If that's the way you wanna be.

M: I've answered that question before and don't feel like doing so again.

B: Just asking mate, just asking. No offence intended.

M: Why don't you ask me about how I'd like my hair instead?

B: Settle down mate. I was just being friendly.

Barber prepares for cut.

M: *(pause)* Your magazines are all looking pretty old.

B: No one else has complained about them.

M: That's because they're too polite. This place needs a bit of attention: some current magazines, maybe a bunch of flowers, some up to date photography.

B: Are you on drugs buddy?

M: No I'm not on drugs. I'm just clearly suggesting that your reading material needs updating, that a few visual improvements would be welcome and that you immediately ask a client what sort of haircut he'd like before casting aspersions as to his socio-economic status.

Long Pause

B: Uni student are ya?

M: There you go again. You still haven't asked me about my hair!

B: You better watch it buddy. My father fought some of the best and I still know how to put my dukes up.

M: Since you don't seem to want to ask me what sort of haircut I'd like, I'm going to have to tell you. Short at the back, short at the sides, keep a bit on top and a bit of gel to smooth things over at the end. Simple. Got it. And I've got correct change so you won't complain. And I'm not a uni student and just because it's 12.58pm on a sunny autumn Monday, don't think that I'm a dole bludger or living off a big inheritance. Now you've got your directions for the cut. So go ahead and cut it!

B: If I wasn't so hard up for cash, I'd throttle you champ but it's a tough profession...

M: Oh don't give me that whining clap-trap about how hard up you are. You fit in three in an hour sometimes at \$18 a pop, that's \$54 an hour. You probably own the shop. And what does the taxman get out of it hey, out of that little metal box? I don't see a cash register anywhere. I've been past here numerous times and seen it full, and listen mate, if you don't put a stop to your fat old war mates smoking in here, I'm gonna call the health department. Nah, you're doing all right for yourself. I can tell. You're no renter.

B: I've worked bloody hard...

M: Oh yeah and you went to Vietnam as well, got the wrong number in the ballot which ruined a promising footy career for St.Kilda, and your parents went through the Depression, and there was nothing on the table, and you got scurvy as a kid too and didn't have shoes for the winter. Oh you've been through it all.

B: I should chuck you through that window buddy. One more word from you...

M: Think Steve Price and John Laws are gospel as well do you? Think refugees deserve what they get. Keep 'em all out there in the heat. You'd consider yourself a pretty fine Australian, wouldn't you? I bet. Well I reckon you're a closed minded phony dripping in sentimentalism, and friendly, yeah really friendly, as long as your male, agree with everything you say and have either Irish, English or Scottish ancestry, well then, there'd be a good chance of getting along, wouldn't there?

B: You want me to pull on the gloves buddy-boy? I've got some mates as well who could put you through a wall with one finger.

M: Ah resorting to violence, that's the answer, the answer to all your woes and problems, isn't it? Hit the kids, hit the wives even hit your mates after a few too many and blame the lot on alcoholic fathers and overworked mothers and repressed Catholicism and too many potatoes and there's that old Depression again rearing up pre-Hitler and hitting you

hard right in the solar plexus, and the war mate, the war, it was tough out here, bloody tough out here beside the wireless in – Rockdale! But you wouldn't like technology would ya? You're probably cursing the day when Rockdale's first telephone got installed at the Post Office in 1886!

B: I'm going to put you away mate. How you just got out of the asylum? I pay my taxes. I'm a happily married man, a faithful husband. I've got two kids. One's doing real well in real estate. The other's an accountant. I love my grandkids.

M: Sons who are ripping others off as well. They're not careers mate. Any fool can push their way into real estate or accountancy via a bit of time in TAFE. Some dropkick talking patios and bedrooms and a bean counter. Mate, you've failed!

B (*grabbing him out of the chair*): Get out of my shop! I don't want your money. Get out, right out and leave me alone or I'll be ringing the cops and putting you on harassment charges.

M: Feeling a bit hurt buddy-boy?

B: I'll get these big clippers on your ball-bag if you're not out of here in ten seconds!

M: What would you say to the cops anyway? It's not like we've had a fight. I'm just reiterating your opinions on life. You can't send a man to the lock-up when he's only mirroring verbally your racist, biased, narrow-minded opinions on things. I've sat in here before listening to your rants and raves. I'm just giving it back. I've got you down to a T. You've got no charge on me old digger or should I say comrade?

B: You're a nutcase mate. A looney. I bet you're probably one of those dirty perverted homosexuals as well.

M: You would think that but when I was fifteen I passionately kissed a girl from Dingley at the monthly Blue Light Disco. No sir I am a not a homosexual. I have been in love with a minor Australian soap star and once spent a night with the captain of a women's water polo team in a very confined dormitory in Waco, Texas.

B: I bet you're a Nazi sympathizer or one of those who goes for child pornography on his computer. Yeah that's it. That's it. You disgust me. Staying home all day to do that. My taxes are paying for the likes of you to come around to my shop and abuse me. I'll fix you up good and proper. A war with you in it would be the best thing that could happen. You wouldn't last a minute. Your own battalion would nab you.

M: You probably think every sex act is evil - even in blissful marriages. You were probably cheering Bjelke-Peterson from your north-facing balcony when he was banning condoms in the mid 80s. You probably still want couples to do it all on the rhythm method! Now here's your last chance. I won't ask you again. Get on with my haircut. And I want Brylcreem at the end not gel. I've changed my mind. (*Sits back down*)

B: I gonna rip a blade across your throat matey if you don't get out.

M: There you go, there you go again with all your World War 2 Japanese referencing, anti-Japanese as well no doubt and it's 2008! I should have guessed. All your prejudices seethe and fester and you don't even know it! I'll tell you something matey. The biggest losers in this country are you and your beer swilling, gambling, everyone's-doing-it-tough-on-the-land mates and you lot sit around with your endless hours of pub pontification thinking you hold all the answers between races at Dapto and Woy Woy.

B: My uncle got an OBE! My brother's one of the top men in the freemasons. My mother was a nurse attending to the sick...

M: Oooh gee we're clutching at straws now aren't we? Anyway, you won't be getting a cent out of me. You've kept me too long but I'll finish with one last piece of advice. From now on, from the next person that walks in, whatever color, sexual or political preference, it doesn't matter if he's a one legged transvestite with blue and yellow hair, a horse mane on his backside and a terrible lisp - just shut up, don't ask questions, don't assume anything and do what you're paid to do - cut hair! I'm on a mission to make nosey barbers like you SHUT THE FUCK UP! And now, buddy-boy (*pause*) I'm going to shoplift some Brylcreem because your emphysematous lungs won't stand a chance chasing me down the shopping strip.

The man rushes out.

The barber picks up the phone.

B: (*Lights very slowly fade to black as barber leaves and talkback radio continues*) Is that 2UE? Is that the open talkback line? I've been an honest barber for the best part of thirty years. I did my national service. I'll always help an old digger find a taxi and help a woman with her pram getting off the train, and I just want to say this, something that's a big problem with this country. Young blokes haven't got enough to do these days. The other day I could hear a bloke breaking up with his girlfriend on a mobile phone on the train station. And others are just plain abusive. They're big overly educated know it alls who just want to disrupt our sense of peace and well-being and contribute nothing to this great country. They've got all the lingo but they don't want to get their hands dirty. I caught one the other day trying to rip down my flag in my front garden and there's dole bludger homosexual junkies coming into my shop stealing Brylcreem, chipping away at all I stand for. Ship 'em off to war I say. Bring in compulsory national service or give 'em a month in the heat with the refo's...

Blackout

The Wanting

A man that is yet to speak sits on a chair at a table alone. Three empty pot glasses and one full glass of beer are beside him. Dressed in T-shirt and jeans, he drinks slowly, occasionally flexing his arms behind his head. He looks tired, ragged. The full glass of beer is drunk through the course of proceedings.

Man: He had this second-hand but in really good condition Land Rover. Stupid car. I hate them but he got it cheap off a guy at work. *(pause)* It's true we'd drifted a bit in the last few years but that happens when you've known each other for twenty-five. And anyway, he'd had kids, all the stuff that goes with that. *(pause)* He wasn't completely faithful. There were one-nighters, something else maybe. Who knows? I didn't like him for it...and I've always liked Joanne, his wife. *(pause)* Maybe I've liked her a bit too much. A friend of ours said I was the one she should have married - yeah yeah, I don't know, it's by the by. *(pause)* I'd be lying if I said there weren't times when I didn't want her. But I didn't keep in contact with him to keep in contact with her. Oh maybe a couple of times I did...I don't know. *(long pause)* From like fifteen we were out together all the time. We somehow managed to find girlfriends who liked the idea of a gang. It's like that thing how men instantly relax when the women around them drink beer! It's simple. There's no division. All becomes equal. Rebecca'll get this jug. You beauty! It was amazing. We always seemed to find funny, pretty smart girls who liked beer! Anyway, we trekked around, overseas, went to London together for a year to work but I don't remember much about anything practical. I just remember London spinning of a night in the back of black cabs, us carrying on, going from pub to club, trying to meet English girls unlike a few others we knew there who were just running into girls from Melbourne and seemed to be happy about it. I remember one night after a few pints somewhere, Hunters and Collectors were playing and I said to all these people, forget it, will ya,

what's the point? You may as well all be in Melbourne, you homesick freaks! (*laughs, long pause*) He wasn't always reliable. Sometimes he just wouldn't turn up for things, no call, not a word. You'd ask him next time you saw him. You'd be angry for a minute and he'd just say 'Nah, couldn't make it!' And I'd just accept it. Sometimes, there was even something relaxing about it. (*long pause*) I was always too weak, way too weak to get stuck into him about the cheating on Joanne thing. In a few drunken moments over the years, late at night, when I've felt lonely, I've almost felt like picking up the phone and giving her the truth - but I've always pulled back. (*pause*) Heaps of times I thought we'd lost contact for good but then he'd ring up on a Thursday or Friday night and we'd talk, laugh about something from ages ago or we'd remember someone from way back (*chuckles*). The last time I ate with him he had two veal parmas and all the salads and chips as well. I asked him if he was signing up for World Championship Wrestling! (*pause*) Fat pig. (*long pause*) Fat selfish pig. (*long pause*) You might think I'm talking about him like he's dead. Well he's not. But he may as well be. Right now, I wish he were. (*He becomes extremely agitated then slightly teary before slamming his fist across the table and then standing up*) What can you say about somebody you've known since you were ten, whose parents knew each other, whose houses became each other's, whose backyards became each other's, who split the cost of a beach-house down at Rosebud every summer for like fifteen years? What can you say about someone you think you know well, someone you've trusted, even praised to other people? What can you say about someone when you find out that he's been fucking your sixteen year old sister, your sister who's doing Year 11, and that now she's pregnant, scared out of her brain, not knowing what to do and he goes home, hugs his kids, gets into bed with Joanne and like, and like...when Sal rang, she was crying like I've never heard anyone cry before, this high pitched wail. I kept asking: 'What is it? What is it? What's wrong? What's wrong, Sal?' I must have said it thirty times. Sixteen.

Her first boyfriend. I rang Joanne and said I'm coming around. She said he's not here. I said I'll wait. I'll wait with you. The kids were making a lot of noise. I told her that he wouldn't have any idea that

Sal's pregnant, that she'd only told me. Twelve weeks down. *(pause)* When I got there she was drinking vodka, smoking, eating corn chips, huge tears were falling onto the floor. She knew about things he'd done. She must have or been in denial. How many others were there? And then my sister, that fat pig, her first boyfriend. Fuck. *(pause)* I waited in the house. Joanne left and took the kids to her mother's place. Eight o'clock, nine, ten; I watched the late Channel Ten news with Sandra Sully having trouble with the autocue and then Sports Tonight. How long has Tim Webster been at it? I drank quickly from his fridge and waited and waited and waited. A bit after midnight, I saw those fat Land Rover headlights come up the drive and rock a couple of pot-plants. *Say Goodbye* by Hunters and Collectors was coming out of the CD player. How appropriate. I stayed on the couch. *(long pause)* When he came in and saw me he tried being casual. 'G'day mate, what are you up to?' I walked up to him and I swear I've never hit anyone in my entire life but I grabbed his throat and tried ramming his head into the wall and I screamed at him: 'Scum, scum, you are scum. How does it feel to kill two families? Sal's pregnant. Scum, scum, scum...screaming into his face over and over until my throat burnt. But I couldn't throw a punch. Don't know why. Then I said: 'Give me the Land Rover, scum, give me the Land Rover, fat scum.' He handed over the keys. He knew how much he'd destroyed. I left him there in the too bright heavily mortgaged house with the oversize TV and Steve Waugh autobiography on the coffee table. *(pause)* In the car, the Hunters were playing tricks on my memory. As I drove, because of them, just for a second or two, I even remembered him fondly. Can you believe that? I got on the South-Eastern doing about 140, down Brunton Av and took it into the corner of Russell and Bourke. I got out of the car, saw a couple of dodgy looking guys in trakky daks and

beanies, one in a Guns n' Roses T-shirt, doing whatever, I said: Do you guys get off on joyriding? Well there it is. Do whatever you like with it. I don't care. I don't ever want to see it again. *(long pause)* Wouldn't mind another beer. *(long pause)* Joanne rang yesterday. Told me she's leaving him, staying with her Mum for now and doesn't know where he is. She told me we have to keep this from all the parents, best we can. Forever. Let them retire in peace. *(pause)* I rang Sally. What do you say? I told her to ring me anytime, anytime, day or night. I said I'd pay for the abortion. What choice is there? She can barely speak, poor kid. Mum and Dad are still dragging her to the Catholic Church. *(long pause)* Tomorrow...tomorrow I'm going to track him down – he'll have to turn up again sometime somewhere...he'll have to. *(pause)* It might be time to throw my first punch. *(He departs quickly. The glass collector grabs his glasses and wipes down the table.)*

Damon Dukirk Reinigorates in Wewer, Germany

Well who would have thought? Germany, June, the start of the northern summer, a new lease of life for a weary trounced upon poet.

The Ernest G Moll Poetry Prize For Forgotten Genius - \$15,000 Euro Dollars. No more tin spaghetti, disposable razors, train ticket avoidance, measly tins of *International Roast* and *No-Name* fish fingers for Damon Dukirk. I'm thinking up-market: fine beer, expensive sausages with classic French mustards and lots of shouts at the local discos. I'm feeling like John Travolta reincarnated! Yes, yes, it's 2008 and it's fun, fun, fun for No 1!

The prize clearly states that the poet can take up residence in any part of Germany that he or she chooses. A more spendthrift, fashion conscious scribbler would probably head straight for Berlin, or perhaps Munich, Cologne, even Dusseldorf, where the cost of living is exorbitant and often crushing. How distracting those large cities can be! What could be worse than inflated rent and writers' block all in the name of effete romanticism; the emerging poet unable to rise from his lager soaked single, bogged down by the weight of German literary history because he's got Goethe hanging over his left shoulder, Hesse weighing down his right and a genius like Holderlin smashing into his flabby, under-exercised gut!

But there's none of that here - in Wewer. In the pub, the old locals talk of bird shooting and 3rd division soccer. They smoke enormous cigars which don't leave their lips all day. Yesterday, I went two hundred kilometres south for dinner with three generations of my

ex-girlfriend's German family. I tried a big cigar in the early evening eventually leaving it on the window ledge overnight and when I woke up in the sluggish grey dawn, it didn't even need relighting! Try that with your Weet-Bix!

My ex-girlfriend's happily married now: two kids, her husband a struggling novelist but also some sort of mathematician/computer whizz so that when he chooses to work he earns \$3000 a week. So even though he's not working all the time, he still comes out with the title: *a well-earning man*. I have to admit he's a fine writer, finer than I may ever be. Last night, on the couch, thinking of his income, his finely honed technique and the woman he was in bed with, I had to grit my teeth as the cigar smoke rose around the stereo. The imbalance of it all, I seethed, from my dehydrated mouth. These left brain, right brain aristocrats! Their genetic superiority gives me bunions!

Purged then from my jealous system, I slept well, waking to a casual but sumptuous breakfast followed by a snooze on the train before returning to the kind arms of my new home - Wewer - as in Las Vegas but spelt **W E W E R**.

I have a friend who grew up here but now makes oodles of Euros in Frankfurt banks. I have his recently renovated basement. Behind these apartments there's a tiny forest with a walking path which oddly leads to a small international airport - not that I should be thinking of going anywhere. I really need a couple of quiet nights. After last weekend, I could easily burn out my welcome in this town.

For one weekend, every May, the town throws a *Schutzenfest* which is a three day drinking fest with a disco playing stuff like Nina's *99 Red Luft Balloons*. There's

sausages, beer stalls, dodgem cars and some traditional dressing up and local music for the older folk so everybody's happy. On the Friday afternoon, there is a bird shooting competition and the winner of the contest becomes King for the weekend.

My friend Frankie from Frankfurt came back for it and we hit the festival with wilful abandon. Each night we went to bed at six am, slept till midday, had a dip at the local pool and hit the beer tent again around two. The second night I fell asleep in the middle of the road of my luckily quiet street. By the Sunday night, I was so numb from beer and at other times so delirious with exhaustion that the DJ was moved to announce during a version of Oasis' *What's The Story Morning Glory*: 'Look at Dukirk, look at Dukirk. He's been at our festival for three days: drinking, eating sausages, riding the dodgem cars and trying to pick up a woman and now in the last hours, he's got his arms around two men!'

Now my German is basic at the best of times. This announcement brought huge doses of laughter and Frankie had to hold back a couple of the town's married women thinking I may have been an easy one nighter. During my recovery, I kept thinking that all this stuff should have ended years ago. Those years paralysed by the thought of commitment would see me dedicate myself to somebody for no longer than 12 hours, usually the first half plying myself with alcohol in the game of loosening up. I was so determined some nights to get some quick action in the cot that one night I pre-booked motel rooms in four different destinations allowing myself ample opportunity to pick up across the whole spectrum of the sprawling city and not have too far to drive. Of course, nothing happened.

I musn't forget the reason I'm here: to write, to resurrect. Each morning, I hear songs on the radio I haven't thought about for fifteen years. I'm driving a new sporty Renault care of Frankie's generous father and I take the car out through these surrounding hamlets, often stopping for a beer and sausage on the dot of midday. You could say that I'm not pressurising myself. You might ask do I deserve the money? Shouldn't I be locked away for eight hours a day perfecting my art? Am I actually more inspired to write than in those last inactive days back home? Am I just living out an early retirement in the middle of life? All this will be answered soon in my most autobiographically honest piece of work to date: *A Talent For Dream And Sunshine* - the antithesis of every garret soaked, depressive, addictive poem the public has had to wade through. This poem will encapsulate: glowing health, formidable eating, the eroticism of bayside swimming, country drives in sun-roofed cars, the pleasures of the Thesaurus and will also include a joyous critical dissection of my current favourite disco hits: *Murder On The Dancefloor*, *Rhythm Of The Night* and *Crying In The Discotheque* including diagrams and dress ideas to woo the one you like. It will be so overwhelmingly positive that it could only throw my critics into serious bouts of depression about their own hopelessly nitpicking little curiosities. Go on, put down your bitter biros and go and pay the gas bill you rain coated, listerine begging musty octogenarian before-your-time grumblebums! All this is possible in Wewer, a town without any harassments to the soul.

I admit, there have been a couple of nights where the presence of a woman would have been more than welcome, where instead I've had to content myself with watching

Motorhead on German variety television or sitting with a peacock over an unpromising pasta. Call it lazy, call it sensible. After only selling four copies of my last book due to the spiteful detritus that critics like Burnt Buttocks spew forth onto their tight deadline computer screens, I must look for a new country with which to make a literary splash and this is where my new basement and its adjacent airport come in very handy. I'm off next week for a reading tour of Iceland. Summer in Reykjavik amongst all those cryptic pale-faced go-getters should be superb and I'll have you know that Reykjavik has the largest population of poets per capita of any city in the world. Forget Paris, if you want a poet next door, take a three hour flight from Wewer via London! God bless these young achievers on the margins who realize that Dukirk has a valuable place in their cool realm.

Yes, there will come a time when the money runs out, when I'll have to return to the lamentable reality of dole queue or paid job, a time when the poem is finished and may again be dismissed; my work bound up disproportionately and endlessly in the relentless grunge spirit of the mid 90s. There may come a time, and it might happen in Wewer, when I'll convince myself again that I should have never taken up writing in the first place. But what is a writer without self-doubt? Doubt will always haunt me no matter what guest list I'm on, what publisher gets interested and what woman scrawls her phone number on my thinning elbow. So for now, the key is to stay bound in the present, keep the drinking to a minimum, pour my heart into the poem and keep my gums from bleeding. I might even phone my old nemesis Burnt Buttocks for some listerine. That is enough. Surely, that is enough.

