

Butterfly Woman

Dave Cauldwell

Disgust overwhelms me as I watch it dangle from her mouth. To and fro it swings – the pendulum of my discomfort. It's been there too long to be an accident but not long enough for me to say anything – even if I wanted to the sickly lump in my throat would stifle any sound. To and fro, left and right, drip, drip, drip; the soup splashes back into the bowl. This is a purposeful act of antagonism – she knows how much I can't stand it. If she were a man I could understand such disgusting table manners, but any self-respecting woman would've sucked it up by now. Not Trudy. She pretends not to notice as my fingers fidget and I squirm in my seat. Seconds feel like hours and the compulsion to lunge across the table and pull it out is getting too strong to resist. I'm just about to spring into action when, as if sensing my impending swipe, Trudy slurps the noodle and it's gone, like a snake charmer hastily luring a serpent back into its basket.

People's peculiarities have always fascinated me, perhaps because I'm quite odd myself. It's a question of perception, one I believe is determined by our parents. They are architects, building the foundations for their children although not all of them have passed the entrance exam; chipped bricks and wrongly-mixed cement is sometimes used during construction. If the mother is a good builder then she'll use the best plaster and will grout where she anticipates holes may appear during the ageing process. Trudy's parents used seemingly quality materials that were more likely purchased off the back of a lorry.

My parents were more like artists than architects. My father was a painter in his spare time, although his relationship with the canvas was more cathartic than exhibitionist. Painting was a release. It was time away from my mother who never learnt to draw but dabbled in life's paint anyway. Little does she know how her brush strokes left indelible marks on my mind.

When it came to table manners my mother was fastidious. Setting the table was an act of calculus. Distances from knives to forks to plates to cups – everything was measured, even the angle of dinner mats to how the chairs were positioned at the table. I was afraid to touch any of the cutlery (let alone set it down between mouthfuls) in case any of the angles were disturbed. This also translated to the rest of the house. My mother was so particular about things being symmetrical that once, when one of her vases cracked, she painstakingly carved a matching chip with one of my father's screwdrivers to balance out the imperfection.

Her presence was omnipotent in a house so small and I couldn't help but feel frightened. One of my earliest memories of her wrath was when I was five. She'd left her handbag unguarded so I decided to give myself and her bedroom a makeover. I spilt foundation on the carpet, stained the bed sheets with nail varnish remover and smeared more lipstick on the mirror than on my face. When my mother entered carrying her freshly-dishwashed Crown Derby tea set she dropped them on the floorboards. She shrieked (partly, I suspect, because they didn't break symmetrically) so loud and so high that next door's dogs began barking. In an instant her face turned redder than my lipstick-smattered one and for the next week I had to sit on a cushion until my brother's birthday, after which I couldn't sit down at all.

Like Trudy with her unruly noodle behaviour I used to be a messy eater – until the day my brother turned eleven, perhaps the most vivid of all my childhood memories. My father had bought a cake covered in chocolate icing and we all sat around the dining room table and sang to my brother. My mother cut the cake, having systematically measured its dimensions so all the slices were the same size. As candles

were blown out, the telephone rang and my father got up to answer it. My mother excused herself and went to the toilet. Whenever my brother and I were left alone he turned into a vindictive little shit, and it wasn't long before we were quibbling. He pulled my hair and I dug my nails into the flesh of his arms. He screamed and jerked me forward, burying my head in the cake. Before I had any time to wipe all the E-numbers off my face, the toilet had flushed and my mother stood in the doorway with a look on her face like she was chewing electricity. After several racist remarks, she frogmarched me to the bathroom and scrubbed my face as if she was planing wood. All the while she whispered cruel asides about how unworthy I was to be *her* daughter. Despite meek protestations from my father she beat and harangued me until I was incapable of crying anymore.

As I grew up I began to realise that my mother's obsession for mathematically-arranged furniture and her abhorrence of uncleanliness had far deeper roots. The flame which ignited her petroleum-fuelled outbursts was sparked by order – or rather lack of it. Our pristine and dustless home contradicted the mess inside my mother's head and on numerous occasions I heard her mumbling incoherently behind the study door. Through the keyhole I watched as she scribbled away, releasing the confusion inside her head into copious notebooks which filled the neatly stacked bookshelves. The study was my mother's sanctuary and nobody was allowed inside but her.

A loud slurp brings me back to the present moment. I look up just in time to see a stray noodle lash Trudy across the face and flick chilli sauce into her eye. She screams. Half of me thinks it serves her right for her appalling table etiquette, but the sympathetic side of me reaches forward and offers her a glass of water. She rebuffs it and opts to rub her eye instead. Soon realising this is a terrible idea, she changes her mind and practically throws the water across her face. 'Perhaps you should ask for a pair of safety goggles next time,' I say, trying not to laugh.

Trudy ignores the comment and takes a pocket mirror from her handbag. 'It's all bloodshot,' she complains. 'I can't go back to the office looking like this. I've got people to interview this afternoon.'

I fork a piece of octopus into my mouth and quickly dab the sides of it with a serviette. 'I'm sure your clients will have more pressing matters on their mind than your red eye.'

Trudy puts the mirror away and approaches her next mouthful more cautiously. 'I've got a Pakistani guy to look forward to after this.' She rolls her eyes. 'He's a homosexual who reckons he'll be persecuted if we don't give him a visa. Claims his brother will kill him to honour the family name as soon as his plane lands in Karachi. Have you ever heard such nonsense? He's had lots of time to come up with a more believable excuse than that.'

Trudy spears a piece of lamb too big for even her mouth and waves it around as she talks. 'I've got a good mind to send him to Villawood for a while. Then we'll see how much he likes Australia. It's a shame they closed Woomera if you ask me. These people think they can just waltz in here and sponge off the state.'

Trudy eats noisily and with her mouth open. Her air of self-righteousness shrinks my appetite. I put my fork down. 'What if his case is genuine?'

She stops chewing and her eyes go flat, as if her brain has a puncture. She speaks with her mouth full. 'You can be so naïve sometimes, Emma.' She swallows hard. 'Let's not talk about my work – tell me about Stephen.'

It's my turn to sigh and look incredulous. 'He needs to get over himself,' I say. 'I was sitting on the train minding my own business when four inspectors leapt on wearing trench-coats and sunglasses like they're Matrix extras. They spread out like a perfectly executed fart and march down the aisles as if they're strutting down a Paris catwalk. Arrogant pricks. Talk about a power trip.'

'Had you bought a ticket?'

'I had an inkling that I should this morning. I was almost glad when they jumped on. Until I saw one of them was Stephen.' I play with a piece of octopus, stabbing its underbelly. 'It's the first time we'd seen each other in nine months. The first time since—'

'You tipped a punch bowl over his head.' Condescension creeps into Trudy's voice.

'He deserved it – he cheated on me!'

Trudy pauses and eyes me like I'm an immigrant with false documentation. Her face tautens like she's just dunked her face in a vat of cheap soap. She has the look of a fierce school teacher, and I one of a pupil who has forgotten to do her homework. 'There's a time and place for everything, Emma. I'm not sure airing your dirty laundry at his birthday dinner, in front of all his friends and family, was the most appropriate course of action.' Trudy forks more lamb but it falls off and splashes back into her soup. 'What was it like seeing him again?'

My mind casts itself, like a fishing line into a polluted river, back to this morning: greasy hair shinier than the badge on his coat, a pallid complexion duller than the cloudy sky and a posture so rigid he was in danger of snapping.

I shudder. 'It made me feel sick to think we'd been intimate.'

'Did he speak to you?'

'He did more than that,' I say, impaling the octopus and drowning him in soy sauce. 'He asked for my ticket so I handed it to him. Then he looked around the tram and stuffed it into his pocket before calling his supervisor over and telling him I hadn't got a ticket.'

Trudy shakes her head. 'I can't believe Stephen would do such a thing.'

'I'm not making this up!'

'What happened next?'

'I tell the supervisor my ticket's in Stephen's pocket but he laughs and looks at me as if I'm mad. He fines me and I can't even lie about my address because Stephen knows it. Twisted jerk. He's not going to get away with it – I'm going to write a letter.'

Trudy pushes her bowl away. 'You're not over him yet are you?'

'Long ago.'

She pauses to look down at the serviette I'm slowly tearing to pieces. 'Then why haven't you dated anyone for the last nine months?'

'Because all the men I meet are pigs.'

'You can take Simon off that list.'

Simon: Trudy's childhood sweetheart whom she's always placed on a ridiculously high pedestal. Sometimes I wonder if she does it to convince herself how wonderful he is because she doubts it herself. The adulation isn't reciprocated. If anything Simon is keen to spread his love. Ever since he pinched my arse at their engagement party he's been filed under 'slime', along with the rest of the men I know.

Trudy rises from the table. 'You've really got to sort your life out, Emma. Simon and I have such a great relationship.' She pauses for effect. 'You'll be a lot happier when you have a partner. I couldn't imagine life without one – it must be terrible!' She puts on her jacket. 'Get the bill for this will you? I'll pay you back next week. Right now I've got immigrants to send home.'

Sometimes I think the basis of our friendship is habit and all that holds the fragmented pieces of our relationship together is guilt, for outside of her union with Slime-on I'm all Trudy has. We were close at university but nowadays the only thing we have in common is a love for sizzling eel. After graduation Trudy went to work for the government and I went into an office to become a dispensable cog in a meaningless corporate machine. Frustration and tedium pushed me back to university and into a Fine Art degree. Trudy looks down on me for pursuing painting and my lack of direction frustrates her. She's on course for the fancy car and expensive mortgage, while the gum boat I'm sitting in rocks through life's turbulent waters with no land in sight. If I ever do find the beach I wonder if they'll be anywhere to stand where the sand doesn't sink.



The Art of Disorder: how mental illness aids artistic genius by Emma Anna.

Abstract:

In this paper I will be discussing the paradoxical nature of the flawed mind in creating enduring works of genius, and how mental illness can allow artists to reach levels of expression that normal-working brains cannot access. Three artists will be profiled: Vincent van Gogh, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, all of which suffered from bipolar disorder. Their work will be critiqued on both conscious and subliminal levels to unravel connections between their disorders and their unique styles which have cemented their positions in the art world.

I stop writing and scratch my temple with my pen before staring blankly down at my desk.

'Does pulling your hair out help you concentrate?' says Mark, popping his head into my studio. He walks

into the room, his large frame making the small space seem more claustrophobic. He grins and his eyes wrinkle like prunes, his dreadlocks arranged like a pineapple on top of his head. He points to the piece of paper on my desk. 'How's it going?'

'Like a car with four flat tyres and no petrol.' I slide it across the desk in resignation. 'Have you finished yours?'

Mark stands in front of the light bulb which gives the outline of his head a saintly aura. 'That's why I'm here. I'm writing about the *Psychology of Decoration* and I need case studies.' The smile on his face worries me a little. 'I think you're the perfect subject.'

Mark's eyes scan the contents of my desk and walls. 'I am?'

'The contents of a room say a lot about the person who inhabits it: from the pictures on the walls to the items on your desk, these objects are like a window into the unconscious.' His eyes fix on me. 'Do you mind if I attempt a quick psychoanalysis?'

I cross my arms and lean back in my chair. 'Go on then.'

He walks over to the wall opposite the door. 'The way these pictures are stuck on the wall tells me something without even having to see what's on them. There are no gaps. If this wall's a reflection of your mind then it's cluttered with no room for coherent thought.'

'It's a collage,' I say in defence. 'There aren't supposed to be any gaps.'

Mark turns round and points to the mind map I've pencilled on the wall facing my desk. 'The central bubble of this diagram,' says Mark, scratching his chin and clearly enjoying his role as resident psychologist, 'is that "the world is broken". Every other thought emanates from this "broken" principal. I'd describe this wall as being fragmented and disordered.' He turns back round to me. 'Perhaps you're trying to piece yourself together.'

I fiddle with my pen. 'Aren't we all?'

Mark picks up a circuit board. 'Where did you get this?'

'I saw it in somebody's hard rubbish.'

'Hmmm. This could represent the wiring of the mind which, I suppose, is like a circuit board. The fact there's only part of it here is suggestive of deconstructing the mind. Perhaps you subconsciously want to rewire your old self and reprogram your mind to be... less chaotic?'

'And maybe I should just wheel a couch in here,' I say, leaning back in my chair. 'I hope you're not charging me for this consultation.'

'Am I hitting any nails?'

'I think you know exactly what you're doing – and are enjoying it immensely.'

Mark walks over to a tiny red fake telephone perched on the corner of my desk. 'This is also interesting.'

he says, picking it up. 'I think this represents the need to communicate. Perhaps the size suggests that you don't express yourself enough and the colour indicates suppressed anger?' He puts the telephone down. 'Have you painted anything yet?'

I look forlornly at my easel.

'How long's it been now?'

'Nine months.'

Mark leans forward and touches me on the arm. 'It'll come back.'

'People have babies in that time.'

'And I'm sure that when your inspiration returns you'll give birth to something beautiful.' He stands up straight. 'What did you think of my psycho-analysis?'

'Interesting but slightly biased because we know each other. If you really want a fair study you should go into the house of a complete stranger and analyse it.'

'That's why I've done this.' Mark reaches into his back pocket, pulls out a newspaper and hands it to me. 'I put an ad in here asking for volunteers for me to do a decorative psychology reading. It's on page twenty-eight.'

I flick through the newspaper. 'Had any responses?'

'Not yet.'

Mark's mobile rings. 'This could be one now. Thanks for being a great subject!'

He disappears and I'm left looking at his newspaper ad. I smile when I realise it's been placed next to the lonely hearts section, next to ads like: *Married Executive, 50, handsome, seeking lady for fun while wife watches.*

Then I notice another ad, just down from Mark's and equally as intriguing. I cannot ascertain whether it belongs with all the other ads for lonely people. If it does, then it's the most cryptic lonely heart entry in history. If this is seduction then it's dressed in a top hat and tails; a grandiose mansion in the middle of a council estate:

*The other day I heard somebody talking about the
Theory of the Remoment: the idea that somewhere in the
city something is happening all over again for the very
first time. Join John for a walk through the city's laneways,
for a journey that will make the most of your every moment...*

This is either the work of a suave womaniser or—or what? Somehow the tag my mind wants to pin on this ad doesn't seem to stick. Has Casanova come to Melbourne? Perhaps this is a lonesome multi-millionaire who relies on the mystery of his words to overcome his hideous facial warts. Whoever this "John" character is, it seems like he has no gender preference – no obesity fetish or need for third party interaction. The only pre-requisite I can gauge is a curious mind and I certainly qualify on that score.

Before the thought skulks away into the swamp of my mind, my fingers dial the number at the bottom of the ad. Within a moment I'm listening to a dial tone; a moment later a voice answers.

Now I'm standing here I'm not convinced this is such a good idea. I'm in the bowels of a graffiti-splattered laneway next to a stack of multi-coloured milk crates. In my nervous disposition my mind wanders to distract itself and looks at the colourful patterns adorning the walls. This part of Melbourne is like a constantly evolving microcosm with ever-changing art which brightens up an otherwise gloomy alley. 'Blank walls, blank minds,' says one tag. My mind is anything but. Are the laneway walls closing in or is it just me?

It's lunchtime and the place is bustling with hungry food-seekers, rushing around to cram in a meal before the office beckons once more. The thought of office work makes me shudder. I was ensconced in it for several years after university finished, floating aimlessly in a sea of mindless bureaucracy which made me want to drown myself. My manager, a woman with a boxer's chin and a voice like she'd swallowed a megaphone, was obsessed with procedure. I was surprised there wasn't a spreadsheet to document who had farted and what it smelt like. You could tell how long people had been working there by how fat and pale they were. Thankfully I got out before my waistline resembled lumpy, rancid custard.

My belly gurgles with nerves, as if I'm about to be deflowered or have a Tetanus shot. The man I'd spoken to on the phone sounded lovely and this was going to be fun. John didn't sound like the usual morons I attract, not that this was even a date. What was it exactly? A walk through the laneways of Melbourne with a total stranger, an opportunity "to make the most of every moment".

I begin to study each man intently, and then, like a salivating dog which scatters the birds, the source of my unease emerges: a scruffy-looking man with a twitch. He leans against a wall opposite me, smiling with jagged yellow teeth that make me want to become a dentist. His face is an uncultivated jungle. Did the invention of razorblades bypass this man? Although it's more likely he'll need a lawn mower to remove that wiry hair.

Uh oh. He's walking this way, well; hobbling is a more accurate description. What else should I have expected from an anonymous ad in the paper? I suppose it's the only way hideously unattractive people like this can meet members of the opposite sex. I shouldn't be so judgemental, but I can see the fleas jumping around from here.

My skin feels prickly just looking at him. He wears an old-style tweed jacket – the kind my old chemistry teacher Mr Inkelman used to wear (tweed = detention), except this vagrant's jacket has patches untidily stitched all over it. It's either the result of a dumpster dive or a 50-cent bargain buy from Savers, complete with unknown strains of bacteria – unless the stains are personal imprints, marks which designate its crummy owner.

His pants aren't much better. They're made out of tartan and no doubt represent the clan McScum. One trouser leg is higher than the other; it looks like the bottom of the left leg has been cut off because it's all frayed. Now I'm afraid. He's too near for me to scarp so I'll just have to get rid of him quickly, say that I'm not feeling well or something. Now what disease can I have? Although by the looks of him, whatever I come up with he's already got it. A voice inside my head speaks: *Mongolian cystitis*, it says – so-called the rash spreads to all areas of the body. What's the point in being subtle? Besides, I think subtlety will be lost on this guy. I can see by the way his eyes dart over my body that he only has one thing in mind.

He draws level and I hold my breath, not wanting to inhale his body odour at close quarters for fear of passing out. He winks (or was it a twitch?) and shuffles by with a look as filthy as his face. Congealed scum is at the corner of his mouth and close-up his beard is like a nature reserve teeming with life: a sanctuary of dried-up food and flaky skin. Thankfully he shuffles past without stopping before merging with the rest of the human traffic. My muscles relax and I again question my intentions.

'Emma?'

I turn to look into the eyes of a man I instinctively know wrote the ad. Except this guy doesn't look like a millionaire oil tycoon or a seedy computer geek who buys mail-order brides. He looks more like a guy who spends his time in Op-shops: an unbuttoned shirt wafts gently in the breeze in the lapel of which is a white flower, as indicated on the phone. Under his shirt is a vest with a large multi-coloured parasol on it. It cuts a fair way down his chest, enough for me to see that he's quite hairy. In between the wiry curls are two fishes hanging on the end of a necklace. His stubbly face is friendly and his pupils an intense blue. I notice a large wheel design on his belt buckle. His jeans are frayed and there is a big knot in his shoelaces. In his hand he holds a conch and in the other a little vase with a jewel on top.

'Sorry I'm late,' he says in a husky voice. He notices me staring curiously at the objects in his hand. He rattles the vase and coins jangle inside. 'It's been a good busking day.' John takes off a backpack and puts the objects inside. 'It's easy to lose track of time when I'm playing my conch; it's like a call to the ocean.' There is a glint in John's eyes as he speaks in an accent that's not from round here.

I hold out my hand and he shakes it. 'You must be John.'

He smiles and nods. I notice the dimples in his cheeks.

'How did you know it was me?'

John smiles as he zips up the rucksack and puts it on his back. 'You're the only one in this laneway loitering with intent.'

I laugh a little too easily and a high-pitched noise escapes my mouth. Luckily it is soon lost amongst the chatter, although embarrassment lingers in my burning cheeks.

We stand in awkward silence for a couple of moments until John breaks it. 'Shall we go?'

Over John's shoulder I spot the twitching man frantically scratching his beard. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Lead the way,' says John, extending his arm. 'Show me around the laneways of this great city.'

I frown. 'I thought you were taking me on a journey.'

'I am, but you're the one who's going to lead it.'

I think about replying but smile instead and we set off up the laneway, against the tide. It seems John is keen for me to lead the conversation as well. 'Have many people responded to your ad?'

'You're the first. It seems like people don't have the time—or inclination—to come and enjoy a moment with a total stranger.' He laughs to himself. 'It certainly seems like nobody down here has any time. It's all a bit frantic.'

'That's lunch hour for you.'

'That's the city for you; everybody's rushing round chasing their own tail.' He looks at me and cocks an eyebrow. 'Have you ever heard about the Theory of the Remoment?'

I shrug. 'I didn't know there was one.'

'Most people aren't aware of the moment they're in, let alone that moments can be repeated.' John pauses and looks into a nearby restaurant, in particular at a man who sits before a bowl of steaming soup. His tie is tucked into his shirt and a laptop takes up most of the table. The man busily types away with one hand while the other fumbles around a plate for a slice of bread. 'Would you say this guy's in the moment?'

The man dips the bread into his bowl and attempts to feed himself. After missing his mouth once and smattering soup all over his chin, he looks disparagingly at the bread before it disappears inside his mouth. 'I'd say so,' I reply. 'He seems to be enjoying that bread roll.'

John raises both eyebrows in reply. 'Four chews and it's gone. I'd be surprised if he even tasted it.'

As he looks at the man I check out John's side profile. His nose protrudes and there's a bony part near the top. Very Roman, very cute. 'I take it you don't think he is?' I say, looking back towards the man.

'Enjoying his meal?'

'In the moment.'

The man types something into his laptop and reaches for his spoon with the other hand. He shakily dips it into the bowl and proceeds to move it tentatively towards his lips, missing his mouth and pouring hot soup into his lap. He kicks the chair back and swears.

'He's in the moment now,' laughs John. 'Nothing like a scalded leg to get you paying attention!'

We walk once more. 'It's very easy to get distracted and lose contact with what you're doing,' says John. 'Be it from external factors – like our swearing friend over there – or whether under the influence of a chattering mind which is constantly trying to lure us away from what's going on right now.'

He pauses and looks at me.

'You're sceptical.'

'No... I just thought it was your mind that keeps you in the present moment.'

'The mind is a trickster and we shouldn't pay too much attention to it.' John pauses by a baguette shop. 'Each time we eat we consume the emotions we are feeling at the time of the meal. That businessman eats more with haste than taste and so that sets the pattern for his afternoon. Come five o'clock, or whatever time his boss loosens the leash, his feeling of stress will have exacerbated because he has immersed himself in the feeling; he's dipping his bread roll in it.'

I think back to my paper and all of the stress it's causing. 'He's probably got a deadline to meet. Maybe his job is dependent on him finishing it by a certain time.'

'That man invites stress into his life,' says John. 'He's chosen to expose himself to this kind of pressure. Right now he's chosen to be governed by his thoughts and step out of the moment.' John plucks out a ten-dollar bill and pays for his baguette.

'Don't you ever get stressed?' I ask John. 'Busking's not exactly a guaranteed source of income.'

He scratches his stubble and stares past me, presumably looking back into the past. 'I used to get very anxious – to the point I nearly had a breakdown. I got so low and unstable that one day I just cracked: there was nowhere else to go but through the anxiety. It was then that I realised stress didn't serve me.'

'You used to be a businessman?'

'Not exactly.' I wait for John to elaborate but instead he takes a large bite of his tuna and mayonnaise baguette. Crusty bread flakes down his front and mayonnaise dribbles down his chin, weaving its way through his stubble like a slalom skier. I begin to feel anxious and have to stop myself from reaching into my pocket and dabbing the sides of John's mouth with a tissue. He's in no rush to wipe the mayo off and if anything seems to be taking great satisfaction in letting it run down his face.

'This really tickles,' he says after a moment.

'Then why don't you wipe it off?' My tone is snappy but John doesn't seem to notice.

'It's uncomfortable,' he says, mouth full. 'But strangely enjoyable.' He looks at me and I know that I'm failing to hide my disgust. My mother's voice resonates inside my head and I can still feel her striking me; the taste of chocolate in my mouth.

John goes in for a second bite and allows the mayonnaise to drip to the floor. More spills out and follows the marked white trail of the first. It teeters on the end of his chin before succumbing to gravity.

'Was that a remoment?' I ask as John finally wipes his chin.

He tilts his head and considers my question. 'What do you mean?'

'The same thing happened in consecutive moments – with the mayo.'

'Did it elicit the same reaction from you on both occasions?'

I nod.

'We're just scratching the surface,' he says with a big smile on his face.

John wraps the baguette in its bag and shoves it into his pocket. 'I want us to go on a one-hour walk and during this journey I'd like us both to really concentrate on the moment we're in because—and only if you agree of course—we're going to do it all over again next week: same walk, same route, same conversation; same everything. I want us to engage with this repetition for the next eight weeks.'

Lonely heart ad or not, this guy is strange. Strangely alluring. 'What for?'

'The more walks we do the clearer it'll become.'

I'm having trouble in deciding whether John is a weirdo, whether he is part of a cult or if this is simply an elaborate act of seduction designed to confuse me into submission. 'Will I have to watch mayo dribble down your chin for the next eight weeks?'

John laughs so loud that passers-by stare at us. 'You'll be leading the walk so whatever we experience will be in your hands. We'll meet by the milk crates each week. For the first part of our walk, until we reach this point, we'll be free to talk about whatever – whether it be last week's walk or any questions either of us may have. It's only once we reach here that the script, if you like, begins. At the end of the eight weeks I'll give you something that will make you glad you responded to my advert.'

I pause, weighing up the benefits of taking John up on this offer. There aren't many I can think of: exercise, a mysterious gift and hanging out with John. Still, the thought of the latter persuades me to give the first week a try. I'm not contractually obliged and I can always just not turn up next week.

'OK.'

'Are you ready to begin?'

I pause, wondering what I'm getting myself into. He doesn't know my address so he can't stalk me and there are enough people around so I can't be abducted.

'I guess I'm ready,' I say unconvincingly.

'Then here we go...' John points at the brightly-coloured walls and starts walking. 'What do you think of this graffiti?'

'It's like a living museum of sorts,' I reply.

'The first time I came down this laneway there was a band playing in the corner over there.' He points

through the crowd. 'I think the chitter-chatter of people in a crowd is like music. Have you ever stood in the middle of a throng and closed your eyes?'

I shake my head.

'After a while the different tones and pitches merge into one and get inside your head. They roll like waves and you can really get swept away.'

What was going on inside my head at this moment was the simmering of spicy intrigue. We pass by a restaurant whose light fittings are like dripping tendrils. A fat pigeon perches on one. I stare at it intently for a few moments before saying: 'That pigeon looks stuffed.'

'It's probably part of the artwork down here.' John smiles and points to the pigeon prongs on the windowsill edges that someone has crafted to look like little trees rather than instruments for stabbing birds. 'There have been many moments spent down this alleyway.'

The pigeon shits as we walk under the light fitting. Its deposit just misses the both of us. 'Perhaps that's part of the installation,' I joke as it splats on the floor. I think back to John's mayonnaise moment as we continue walking, turning left when we reach Flinders Lane and heading towards the City Library.



I watch as John disappears down Lonsdale Street. Time has evaporated like the vapour trail of the plane in the sky above. It seems like we crammed so much into a solitary hour, far too much to possibly replicate for next week's walk. I withdraw a pocketbook from my bag and start making notes of what I can remember. It feels like I'm studying for an exam, except I don't know what I'm being tested for and what the consequences are should I pass or fail.

It's nearly one fifteen and after a few scribbles I go to meet Trudy at the usual rendezvous point. She sits at our usual table. What's unusual is that her face hints at a smile. For once she's interested about me and straight away launches into an interrogation about the mystery walk. The more I tell her, however, the further Trudy's eyebrows furrow. I finish and there follows a short silence before she speaks: 'This guy's a weirdo.'

Although I've only known John for an hour I feel confident enough to dispute this. 'More intriguing I'd say. What makes you think he's weird?'

Trudy adjusts her glasses in the pompous manner of a school teacher about to hand out a detention. 'I know you arty types are generally a bit odd—'

'Excuse me?'

'I've met some of your artist friends and, well...' Trudy taps her head, '...some of them are a little cuckoo don't you think? They're all so disassociated from society's conventions.'

My face screws up. 'That's a bit of a generalisation. Anyway, have you ever stopped to think that maybe

society's conventions are what's odd? My artist friends are some of the most switched on people I know.'

'Look at Salvador Dali,' says Trudy, waggling her head like a nodding dog. 'Bloody nutcase. OK, his pictures may be good but he was crazy.'

I clench my fists under the table. 'Labelling people crazy or sane is one of the things I think is wrong with the world. Look at the market that's been created by drug companies for anti-depressants – and all of the other disorders manufactured by society. These organisations are making the diseases so they can distribute a cure. It's all about greed.'

Trudy dismisses my social commentary with a flick of her wrist. 'You and your conspiracy theories. All I'm saying is that I think there's something a little queer about meeting a complete stranger in an alleyway. What if you get mugged or raped?'

'Now who's paranoid? Just because you don't know someone doesn't mean they're going to hurt you. People should be more open to each other.'

Trudy picks up a menu and scans it. 'Sometimes you're too open. Don't come running to me if you end up bruised and battered in a wheelie bin.'

I feel like jamming Trudy's head in a wheelie bin and repeatedly closing the lid.

'You don't even know what he's going to give you at the end of eight weeks. Probably nothing – he's just getting your hopes up. I'd ask for whatever it is upfront so he can't rip you off.'

I signal a waiter over. 'This isn't a business transaction, Trudy. Anyway it's all part of the mystery – I'm not doing it for monetary gain.'

'Why are you doing it?' asks Trudy. She shows the waiter what she wants off the menu.

I pause. 'Maybe there isn't enough mystery in my life. Everything seems so predictable at the moment.'

Trudy looks at me like I've grown another head. 'What's wrong with that? Predictability sustains you – if you know what's coming then you can prepare for it.'

I order an entrée of fried octopus while imagining sticking Trudy's head in a deep fat fryer. 'You can't prepare for everything,' I say as the waiter departs. 'Life isn't as straightforward as that.'

Trudy tuts. 'You seem intent on complicating things. Why don't you quit that silly art degree of yours and get yourself a corporate job. You'll never make any money from it – look at you dad. It's a waste of time. Go where the money is, that's what I say.'

I bite my tongue and indulge in more clandestine fist clenching. Trudy opens her handbag and applies some lipstick. 'Maybe you're part of a reality TV show,' she says, putting it away. 'There's reality shows for everything these days – and the prizes are usually great.' This thought clearly excites her. 'It could be a holiday or a brand new car!'

I frown at Trudy's sudden enthusiasm. 'I thought you were against the idea.'

'Not if it means winning a holiday.' She stares into the distance, clearly immersed in a daydream no doubt involving palm trees and cocktails by the ocean: the queen of cliché. 'If you can choose the destination make sure it's somewhere that has a five-star resort and a swimming pool. They usually give out holidays for two – we'll have such a good time.'

Again my mind turns sadistic and ponders inflicting pain on Trudy – this time tying weights to her feet and throwing her into the deep end. I'm just about to speak when she starts blathering once more.

'You're definitely being filmed. Reality shows are in, although yours probably won't be as interesting as the others. Hang on in there for the holiday though. And next week look out for hidden cameras.'

My mind pursues Trudy's train of thought. For once, what she's saying may actually be plausible.

'You say this guy's from overseas?' enquires Trudy.

'He's English.'

'What's his surname?'

I shrug.

'That's a pity. I could've googled him when I got back to work.'

'I'll try and find out next week.'

'Don't try – make sure you do. Maybe his show's a big hit in the UK.'

Eventually the waiter brings out our meals. Trudy scoffs hers with great speed before I even have the chance to polish off five octopus balls. She rises from the table and tells me she's leaving early to shop for Slime-on's birthday present, casually depositing \$10 (not enough to cover her meal). His birthday party gets a mention and then she's gone before I have time to invent an excuse for not going.

I watch her scurry away, chastising my mind for wanting a tram to appear from nowhere and run her down. I wonder why my tolerance for Trudy is so low today and wonder if my walk with John could somehow be responsible.

I pull out my notepad and continue to make notes:

We enter the City Library and I point out the Mirka Moira painting 'Happiness' which we pass quickly. This feels like a speed tour of Melbourne already, but I'm anxious to squeeze as much experience into our hour as I can. The pace is frenetic which I know is being manufactured by me. John seems more relaxed. We look through some books about travelling and pass shopping baskets which makes the library feel like a mutation of a Borders bookstore. I don't really want to be indoors so we head off again, out of the library and continue up Flinders Lane.

We stop at the corner of Flinders Lane and Cocker Alley and look up. There is the most amazing collection of plumbing pipes running down the side of the wall. John suggests it's like an antique Pompidou Centre. I mention that it's going to be an art project in the city in a few weeks' time. It's got something to do with the Gold Rush and I tell him the pipes are going to be painted gold. I mention the piping must service the building's toilets, and there

begins a short conversation about rivers of gold... but, as we've only just met this crass line of discussion filters out pretty quickly – I don't want to come across as a complete potty mouth.

I chuckle to myself. Although I've only known him for sixty little minutes, there is already familiarity between John and me even though he is still very much a mystery; a mystery I'm keen to unravel.



A strange feeling comes over me as I see John walking in my direction. I begin to imagine that I'm involved in some kind of anonymous sex meeting where John is the gigolo and I am the elusive mistress. Am I an unwitting actor in some kind of perverse role-playing game? Although I'm not sure how John could get any kind of sexual gratification by walking through dirty alleyways with overflowing wheelie bins, talking about prongs that impale pigeons and watching men spill food over themselves.

I remember what Trudy said about the reality TV show and scan the laneway for potential surveillance. The milk crates are the first items of suspicion, although there is seemingly nowhere to install a camera. Perhaps they're in the light fittings. Or maybe the cosmetic queen sitting at the table nearest to me eating a sausage roll has one in her handbag. A cloud of foundation hovers around her head and her nails remind me of the pigeon prongs; her lipstick is more garish than any of the graffiti.

Mark reckons I'm part of a psychology student's thesis and that my answers to John's prompts are being recorded by a hidden Dictaphone about his person. I'm dubious of this suggestion. Don't people have to get permission for that kind of thing? Mark seems to think that people can do anything they want.

John wears the same clothes as last week. It's almost like he's studied his smile in the mirror because everything from our first meeting is replicated: the handshake, an awkward pause and a simultaneous turn to walk down Centre Way, against the tide.

'What brings you to Melbourne?' I ask. John is walking quicker than last week, seemingly keen to reach the baguette shop where we have to fall back into last week's sequence.

'The same thing I'm doing back home,' is his rather ungenerous reply.

'Can you be a bit more specific?'

He smiles and nods. 'I can.'

There follows a silence in which I'm wondering how I'm going to coax information out of him.

'Why are you doing this?' I ask as the baguette shop fast approaches.

'The same reason you are.'

'But I have no idea why I'm doing this.'

John plays with the two fishes around his neck. 'To find meaning within the madness.'

Checkmate. My brain is stumped and there is no movement from my mouth.

'What do you think of the graffiti?'

Damn! Now the opportunity for interrogation has gone. 'It's like a living museum of sorts,' I reply flatly.

We pass the light fitting where the pigeon sat last week. It's there once more and again I think it looks stuffed. Either that or it's a camera. I pick up a stone and throw it at the pigeon. My aim is remarkably good and hits it on the backside. It coos in surprise and flies off. I feel terrible. John smiles. I'm not sure whether he's intrigued by my strange behaviour, or whether he's deriving great satisfaction in being enigmatic.

Although our conversation begins as it did last week, I notice that as we start walking John's perception of the sequence and content of our previous discussion is somewhat different to mine. There are bits we both recall but the link – how we came to shift from one section of dialogue to the next – is missing. Consequently long sections have disappeared into the conversational ether and as we walk to the library there is a profound silence as my brain goes into overdrive and tries to recall what in the world we filled the air with previously.

I begin to think how John could possibly gain any meaning out of the awkwardness we're manufacturing. Still, the thought pops up and I'm forced to push it away without exploration, instead trying to remember where the conversation should go. My brain is like a computer hard drive that has two memory-sapping software programs which are both trying to operate inside my head at the same time. One represents the memory of the first walk, the other the current situation of our second encounter. My hard drive is having problems processing all the information I'm throwing at it and is in danger of crashing – a bit like I'm trying to open too many files at once.

We head over to the travel section which offers temporary relief and assuages fears of a complete shut down. Thankfully there are visual triggers on this part of the walk which help me extrapolate bits of last week's conversation from the hazy mist inside my head. We walk over to the same bookshelf as we did last week and I pick up the same travel guide to the small European republic of Molvania which neither John nor I have ever heard of. We open up the book to the first page. "Szlengro!" (welcome) is plastered across the top, underneath the picture of a grumpy-looking man with an accordion who simply looks plastered.

'A strange ambassador for Molvania,' I remark. The man looks like he's been forced to pose at gunpoint; his droopy expression is hardly one of a man proud to be associated with his country.

'He's not making me feel very welcome,' says John, urging me to flick on as he did last week.

On the next page is a picture of men grouped in a circle and doing "the dance of the Billiard cues". I inform John that Molvania is the world's number one producer of beetroot and the birthplace of the whooping cough and we move on, briefly discussing the motif of journeying as we walk across the library. John pulls out a book titled: *100 Places Every Woman Should Go* and ponders: 'I wonder if they're all physical places,' before putting the book back on the shelf and walking away. I'm beginning to notice John has a

habit of doing this: saying something cryptic and then suddenly moving on. The less he gives me the more information I want.

We exit the library and walk up Flinders Lane in the direction of the toilet pipes. Again things get confusing. Some of the visual triggers that were set into the narrative last week are absent or have changed. There is a sense that we are performers in a strange little play and I want to feed John his lines when he forgets them. I'm sure he is just as perplexed by my own lack of recollection in key moments. We have no problem in remembering our route just some of the detail of our conversation. I feel a sense of responsibility to recall the walk but when the voids in memory start to appear I'm overtaken by a sense of panic and worry. How can I forget so much in the course of a single week? Is this the early onset of Alzheimer's? There are entire stretches of road that I'm completely vague over. Throughout the walk we both seem to worry that we are going too quickly; it's like the absences push us into a faster pace in an attempt to chase the memories we do retain.

Although John and I have talked pretty much continually for an hour, on this second walk it's like a good third of our conversation has shifted into the recesses of our brains marked "forgotten memory... hopefully temporary".

I think about asking John for a coffee at the completion of our walk, outside the Women's Hospital, but before I get chance he jumps on a tram and disappears back into the mysterious world from which he came.



The canvas sits in front of me, white like a vast tundra. The creative channels in my mind have frozen over and when they'll de-thaw is anybody's guess. I twiddle the brush between my fingers. Although my mind is full to bursting there is an inexplicable blockage which prevents the translation of this untamed energy from manifesting in the form of art.

I begin to think of Mark Rothko, one of my favourite artists. He painted mysterious images without images; viewers brought to the paintings what they saw in themselves or what they wanted to see. Some saw the face of God; others revelled in the consternations of the universe. My canvas represented a white hole and I was buried in a snowdrift.

I look at the paint pots in front of me and my brush hovers in the air. The irony of an artist who can't express herself! It's ridiculous – I can't even decide which colour to use. *Just splash something on there*, I think to myself. *Something, it doesn't matter what*. But it does. Perhaps I'm thinking about this too much. Perhaps I'm thinking about John too much.

Three weeks ago I was happily floating along in an asexual state of being, content to ignore the advances of any man. Now John has come along, a seemingly untouchable stranger shrouded in secrecy; a figure who only exists inside a premeditated and bizarre construction of reality. Is this a classic case of I want what I can't have, or does it run deeper than that? Is there an unspoken connection between us, a reason

I was drawn to his advert? I was the only one who answered it after all—although that was three weeks ago. Perhaps he's seducing other women in the backstreets of Melbourne. Maybe this is why he remains so elusive and unattainable: he's keeping his options open.

'How's the masterpiece going?' says Mark, poking his head into the studio. The back of the easel faces the door so he can't see that I've done nothing.

'I just got back from my third walk so I haven't had time to get into it.'

Mark enters and perches on the corner of my desk. 'How was this week's wander amongst the rubbish bins?'

'A little easier than last week's.'

'You remembered more?'

'My Alzheimer's isn't as bad as I first thought.'

'So what's the deal with this guy? Did you ask him out for coffee afterwards like you said you would?'

I rest the paintbrush on the easel and stand up. 'He always scurries off before I can ask him. Probably off to meet another woman.' I sigh. 'It'd be nice to get to know him outside of whatever experiment he's conducting.'

Mark stands up. 'Maybe he's a Mormon looking for brides.'

I frown.

'A Satanist looking for virgin sacrifices.'

This makes me chuckle. 'He looks more like a slave of St Vincent de Paul's than a minion of Lucifer.'

'Maybe he's just lonely.' Mark takes a couple of steps back towards the door. 'Anyway, the reason I came up here was to tell you that my exhibition's opening in five weeks.'

I scream with delight. 'You got the space!'

'And I've reserved a piece of wall for one of your masterpieces.'

I slump in my chair. 'But I don't have anything.'

'Better get painting then,' says Mark, walking out. 'You should invite this John guy along.'

I listen to Mark's footsteps get fainter and open my desk drawer to retrieve my notepad. I write down several questions to ask John. Next week marks one month and it's time I got some straight answers.



The next week lags terribly and I feel myself resenting time. Nothing else seems to have any relevance apart from my next meeting with John. My brain tunes out at lectures and the thought of painting seems trivial and pointless. I begin to question whether it's actually John or the situation I find alluring. The

people we pass each week have no idea of the ritual we are re-enacting and this makes me feel special, like we are roaming a well-trodden path with a purpose – unlike all the miserable city dwellers that roam with their blinkers on, oblivious to the many idiosyncrasies of this beautiful city. I'm coming to realise that these people are walking around in bubbles they either don't realise are there, or else they are too afraid to burst. Whereas John and I are happy to be walking through the city and acknowledging our surroundings, I am increasingly amazed by those who wander around like drones, whether through boredom or unhappiness or some other reason. Are we the only ones enjoying the dirty laneways, the stuffed pigeons and the treasures we find in overflowing rubbish bins? Although our route and script is the same there is always something different about each experience. It may be the way in which something is said, or a facial expression or gesture which gives ambiguity to a phrase. This is where subtext of non-words embodies our repetitive experience with something fresh.

And so the city communicates with us in new and unexpected ways each week – it's only because our eyes are open that we appreciate these subtle nuances which may appear the same. I feel like new areas of the city are coming alive, and while the connection I have with John becomes more familiar, so does the one I have with the city. Perhaps this is what makes me resent time, for in this hour I feel more connected to everything than in the other 167 that make up the week.

As John approaches I hide my question sheet, having memorised it and devised stalling tactics so we take as long to walk through the graffiti laneway as possible. After the usual smile, awkward silence and simultaneous set-off I embark on my rehearsed questions.

'I've been wondering what this is all about,' I say.

'So you should.' John smiles. 'What are your thoughts?'

'Are you part of an organisation?'

John's open shirt flaps in the breeze. 'I wouldn't call it an organisation – it's more of a collective.'

'Are you looking for new recruits?'

'Not exactly.'

'But you are looking for people with a purpose in mind?'

'You could say that.'

I pause, feigning interest in a lunchtime menu. 'See anything you like?' says John. I take it he's referring to a display cabinet of small cakes.

'That caramel slice is appealing,' I reply, fishing around in my pocket for money.

John cancels out my delaying tactic by producing a five-dollar note and buying the slice. We start walking again.

I take a bite, intentionally not offering any to John so he is free to speak. 'Why are you here?' I ask, my mouth half-full.

John pauses before responding. 'When a caterpillar dies it cocoons itself in a chrysalis.' I begin to wonder if he's ignoring my question on purpose, or whether this is his convoluted way of responding. 'During this process certain cells that have lain dormant within the caterpillar throughout its life are activated. These are called imaginal cells and are what initiates the transition from a squirming larva into a butterfly.'

John's fingers crawl like caterpillar's.

'These imaginal cells are few in number but are very strong and resistant – and they need to be because once they become active the other cells in the caterpillar's body see them as alien and attack them. Although the imaginal cells are heavily outnumbered, they seek out each other and form an alliance that staves off the other cells. The imaginal cells are so strong that the ones attacking them eventually die due to over exertion. Only once this has happened will the caterpillar become a butterfly. It's—'

John pauses. We've reached the baguette shop. 'What do you think of the graffiti?'

Thoughts bombard my mind and I find myself frustrated because I have to fend them off. Suddenly I find it annoying that we have to be in this state of manufactured moments. John's analogy raises more questions yet I must try my hardest to concentrate on what has gone on before and, paradoxically, what is happening now.

We walk through the library, past the toilet pipes and the Town Hall, and by a flower seller's stall. The next stop on our journey is the giant chess board on Swanston Street. This part of the script is so well rehearsed and we move through it with great fluidity. I ask John if he's seen the people who play chess here in the summer. He says he hasn't and suggests we play a game where we are the pieces. He asks me what piece I'd be and I say, without hesitation, 'the Queen' (in my mind I think : she's the ultimate feminist role model – a strong woman who can go anywhere). John says he wants to be the horse because it can move differently to all the other pieces.

I make the first move, diagonally across the board. John moves in a funny way that makes me question his game play. He leaves himself in my line of attack and says: 'Take me... I'm yours' (is he flirting with me?). I win after two moves.

We turn right into a small laneway, Rainbow Alley, a cul-de-sac that offers no way through. There's a group of bike racks that seem to be allocated as parking bays for rubbish bins. I wonder, like I do every week, what happens down here at night and if the bins somehow come to life and have a private party. I remark that they look dishevelled and unsteady – like they've had a big night. The buildings in this part of town look squalid and run down. Frail staircases lead nowhere, up to old doorways that have been bricked up.

John pretends to leave the laneway which is my cue to notice a hole situated low down in the wall. The first week we peeked through the gap John noticed a set of keys hanging in the distance and we chattered about how we could nudge the keys off their hook and let ourselves in the door. The sound of voices and the sight of moving feet caused us to move rapidly on, but this week there are no keys or voices, no trigger for us to move speedily away although this is what we end up doing.

We pass a giant chalk drawing on a grey wall and this kickstarts the Tetris conversation, a moment I am keen to forget but thanks to the wonder of remoment one I am forced to relive for the fourth time.

'Do you remember the computer game where you had to fit the different coloured blocks on top each other?' I say.

John's smirking because he knows what's coming. I have a good mind to reprimand him for smiling out of turn—he didn't smile at this juncture on the first week, but then again my cheeks weren't as red as they are now either.

'It was an '80s computer game if I remember correctly.'

I curse the fact I can remember this part so vividly. I pause and John gestures with his hand for me to say the next line (subconsciously or not – it's something that's been ostensibly woven into proceedings).

'Have you ever played Sex Tetris?' My cheeks are sizzling.

John's eyebrows rise in mock surprise. 'Nope. Tell me more.' He sounds like he's on an infomercial.

'It's where naked men and women fall down instead of blocks and you have to join them in the complimentary sex positions – i.e. missionary with missionary, doggie with doggie – you get the idea.'

'Actually I don't.' John stops himself laughing at this point. The street is particularly busy this week (it was empty in the first walk which pre-empted the actions to accompany the story.)

'Each time you make a pair they hump.' Cue gyrations. 'Like this.'

'Do they make noises?'

'I always played it with the volume down,' I say, lowering my voice and stopping my actions.

Several people are staring at me and John cannot help but laugh. Thankfully everybody's attention is diverted to a schizophrenic man who passes and shouts out at his invisible attackers. People cross the street to avoid him and John and I disappear down a laneway which is narrow to begin with but then opens up to a wide open space. Graffiti used to adorn the walls to a certain level but it has all been painted out. The cover-up job is perfect and aligns with the lines in the brickwork. It has the same feeling as a gallery space hosting an exhibition of minimalist art. I remind John once more that this laneway reminds me of a movie scene which shows a street in Russia known as the "street of perfect proportions" where the buildings on either side are 25 metres high and the distance across the road is 25 metres. John deviates from the script to ask me if I think I'm perfectly proportioned. I chastise him for breaking his own rules and say that I'm in the mood for disobedience as well. This receives another raised eyebrow. 'I make the rules,' he says cheekily, 'so I can break them.'

I put my hands on my hips. 'That's not fair!'

'Nobody said this was a fair game.' His eyes glint, almost hypnotically. He slaps himself on the wrist.

'Shan't do it again.'

We carry on down the proportioned laneway. There is a sense of calm here (no one seems to walk through)

which is strange considering there is a demolition site at the end. The first week we walked down here there were bricks crashing to earth, dust polluting the air and the whir of machinery reverberating from wall to wall. Although there is silence now the construction site is still a gaping wound in the middle of the city.

We walk out of the laneway and past a Vintage Cellars outlet where a truck has recently dropped off two palletes of booze. Although these weren't here on our first week, I stick to the script and suggest we should have a liquid lunch. I wonder if someone hasn't already had that very same idea because one palette has been attacked and two boxes are missing. I ignore the temptation to comment and John mumbles something about the inner criminal. As this is only a slight deviation from the script and barely audible, I ignore it and we carry on to a Chinese restaurant, outside which we stop to look at the plastic food.

'How do they make this?' I wonder out loud. It's been a question I've been pondering for the last month. 'Is it just real food set in resin? Or the specialisation of some wacky food artist who spends his days painting grill marks on plastic dumplings?'

John shrugs, as he's supposed to.

A single green pea in the middle of a preserved/mock dim sim looks like the iris of an unblinking eye.

An old man approaches and starts reading the menu. He then notices us and threatens to turn our routine into disarray by starting up a conversation.

'What do you recommend?' he asks, standing in between us and directing his advances at me. I look over his shoulder at John who's smiling.

'I've never eaten here so I wouldn't know,' is my cagey reply. It feels rude to suddenly walk off and re-enter the repetition, but there is a part of me that wants to do this.

'You look like a regular.'

What's that supposed to mean? I glance over the man's shoulder and see John's smile broadening.

'Are you from round here?' asks the old man. He has an incongruous wart on the end of his nose which wiggles each time he speaks.

'I've been here eight years.'

'I've been here for fifty!' The old man pauses as if expecting a round of applause. 'I'm retired now – used to be a biochemist. I have a son. He's a sociology professor – a very decent young man.'

I scratch my chin and the man looks at my fingers.

'A smoker!' he says, as if uncovering a clue in a detective story.

I nod in shame. I did manage to give up just before my break up with Stephen.

'You'll knock 22 years off your life if you carry on smoking those cancer sticks,' says the old man, his tone turning serious. 'Seventeen if you smoke pot.'

'Thanks for the advice. I'm trying to give up.'

'I had the same problem for years,' says the old man, taking a step back. 'Why don't you come and have lunch with me and I'll tell you all about it. I know a great place.'

At this point John steps in and we politely decline, leaving the old man to scratch his wart. We reach the bottom of the street a gibbering man grabs hold of my arm and attempts to make conversation while ogling my breasts. I shoo him away and say to John: 'I'm fine to talk to them I just don't like it when they touch me.'

I seem to have a penchant for strangers wanting to touch me. Although it's been happening for the entirety of today's walk, the fact that John and I keep (purposely?) bumping into each other is brought to the forefront of my mind. Our arms brush when we walk and when we sit on a bench later on our thighs touch.

As the walk draws to a close I find an interesting sign which has been discarded in the rubbish. Ever the souvenir hunter, I take it out and use it to block the sun. It reads: "Keep off the grass" and I wonder how this must look to passers-by: a one-woman, one-man anti drug protest perhaps? If our biochemist friend could see us now he'd be proud.

We reach the end and I prepare to corner John to talk further. But in a move that's well rehearsed, John pelts away as soon as we reach the Women's Hospital – like a gazelle that smells a lion lurking in the grass. 'I won't bite,' I whisper after him. 'At least not *that* hard.'

We're halfway through this crazy interaction and I'm halfway to discovering what my reward will be for being in the remoment. Being with John seems reward enough, although like a child who's just finished her bag of sweets I'm keen to unwrap the nutty delight that is John.



For the next week I think, dream and see caterpillars everywhere. They're in my salad, in the garden and in subliminal doodles in my notepad. I wonder what John's cryptic allusion to them signifies. As usual, Mark has ideas – silly ones. He suggests John is part of a terrorist group and is recruiting suicide bombers dressed in caterpillar costumes to infiltrate the masses. After several other useless suggestions he shows me "the Caterpillar Boys" on You-Tube: a trio of nude German performance artists synonymous for painting their privates in public. I point out that John is English. Mark asserts that he could be their manager.

After the liveliness of Mark's abstract imagination, it's time for the drab reality of my weekly meeting with Trudy. Staring blankly into canvas seems more appealing than meeting her; the canvas probably has more to say.

I step out of the studio and a rush of wind feels like pin pricks against my skin. How much longer will I be bound by sentiment and governed by guilt? Why do I feel duty-bound to be Trudy's only friend, a sponge that absorbs her negativity? Perhaps she is one of the reasons I haven't painted in the last nine months: she deflates my creative bubble by constantly criticising art. Maybe I'm starting to believe her.

Rain spits and I spot Trudy sitting in the usual position, checking her watch at regular ten second intervals. Her face is like the sky: heavy and dark. I look upward in the vain hope there is a Trudy-sized meteorite thundering from the heavens and careening towards her table. I pause for a couple of moments but the Gods don't heed my plea.

I sit down. Like my canvas, Trudy's face is blank. She remains silent and it's up to me—as usual—to initiate greetings. Like the walks I do with John we are here out of repetition, but unlike time spent with this inscrutable laneway dweller, there is nothing stimulating about chewing octopus balls and riding a conversational merry-go-round in predictable circles. I'm curious to know why she looks more morose than usual, but if I ask she will deny if there's anything wrong. Does Trudy feel anything? Perhaps if I poke her in the eye with my fork I'll get some animation.

'I can't stay long,' she says. How magical these four little words sound: the equivalent of sunshine breaking through the clouds. I try to hide my joy but a broad smile betrays me.

Trudy stands and slides something across the dirty table. The soy sauce soaked piece of paper is an official invite to Simon's birthday. 'Keep next Saturday free,' she says, standing up.

'Where are you going now?'

'To get his birthday present.'

His birthday present – not honey-bun or baby's or any other of the sickly adjectives she attributes to Slime-on. Could there be trouble in paradise? Trudy mutters something that gets lost in the other restaurant chatter and walks away. I order sizzling eel and luxuriate in every Trudy-free mouthful.

After I finish I go to meet John and we set off.

'I wanted to ask you about the caterpillar,' I say immediately.

'It's the wormlike larva of a butterfly or moth.' John smiles, seemingly amused by his own facetiousness.

'What did you mean when you told me that story last week?'

'It isn't a story.'

'Isn't it?'

'It's an analogy.' John buttons his shirt as the temperature dips. 'How much time do you spend living inside the emotions of others, Emma?'

'As far as I'm aware I only live inside my own.'

John shakes his head. 'That's where you're wrong.' He sees me frown and continues: 'Everybody has an ego, right? It's just one of the drawbacks of having a body – part of the package. For reasons of inferiority, frustration or whatever, people consciously and unconsciously play out their egos on each other – especially in romantic relationships. It's human nature.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'Say your partner's had a bad day at work. His boss has undermined him and his ego is bruised because he takes it personally. There's one example of ego transference – an intentional one. Your partner takes his boss's shit and immerses himself in it and then applies to other areas of his life. Since he feels comfortable in showing you his bad side, he may come home and try to regain the authority he's lost by undermining you. The ego is a selfish and subtle creature. Sometimes we don't even realise when it makes us act out of turn.'

I spot the businessman from our first walk slurping another bowl of soup. 'What does this have to do with a caterpillar?'

'Think back to the two cell types we talked about: the imaginal and dominator cells that try to prevent the caterpillar's transition into a butterfly. Which group do you belong to?'

Before I have time to ponder an answer we reach the baguette shop and slip into our established dialogue. My mind is desperate to wander away from our pre-scripted dialogue and delve for further clarification, but I am trapped in the moment, held captive by a conversation which—this week at least—seems a little superficial.

The walk passes without incident until we reach the Chinese restaurant (where the plastic dumplings have mysteriously disappeared). I'm just about to comment on the beef dish when I look past the menu and see Trudy. She doesn't notice me peer in – too engrossed in conversation with a man who has his back to the window. A large trench-coat drapes over the back of the chair and I wonder why Trudy isn't out birthday shopping. Then I notice a shiny badge on the trench-coat and the tell-tale double crown on the back of Stephen's greasy head. My fists clench but John leads me away—intuitively or not—so we can perform the next part of this mock play.

Right now everything feels like a sham: my life, my relationships and this thing with John. I fight the urge to abandon our walk and insert a scene in this ludicrous play where I run into the Chinese restaurant and smear Trudy's face in her bowl of noodles and gouge Stephen's eyes out with chopsticks.

Suddenly my mind is in danger of overloading. Thoughts buzz frenetically and collide with one another, creating friction and sparks of electricity which threaten to derail the rest of the script. What is *she* doing with *him*?

Somehow I make it through to the Women's Hospital and barely notice as John skips away like an endangered species, somehow always timing the end of our walks with the appearance of a tram.

I stare vacantly at the ground and the city blurs. I disappear further into myself and think back to how Trudy always defends Stephen whenever I vent my grievances towards him; how she always plays devil's advocate in conversations about our break up. Now it seems she's playing more than devil's advocate: she's taken the role of Satan herself.

Thursday July 3, 2008

Waited outside the immigration building today – until Trudy came out for lunch. Dressed in grey to blend in with the concrete and followed the bitch to Krispy Kreme where she bought three iced donuts, eating one, before browsing around a tacky souvenir shop. Hid behind a stuffed Koala to maintain anonymity, although my cover was almost blown when this American woman snatched it off the shelf and yelled to her husband about how cute “the Koallah bear” was. Quickly donned a novelty wig and a pair of boomerang-shaped sunglasses to avoid detection.

Next stop was JB Hi-Fi where bitchface selected three CDs from the discount bin and listened to new releases on headphones. Again I nearly jeopardised my mission when I accidentally collided with a display and landed on top of a cardboard cut-out of Justin Timberlake – my closest encounter with the opposite sex since Stephen, who, ironically, was just as two-dimensional. Thankfully Trudy had her headphones on so she didn't hear the commotion. I left soon afterwards, drawing derogatory remarks from the floor manager because I ran off without tidying up the mess. Wonder if the mess inside my head will ever clear.

Friday July 4, 2008

The bitch was ten minutes late coming out today. She was in the shortest skirt I've ever seen the frigid cow wear (just above her knees). It was so tight that she shuffled rather than walked. This made my reconnaissance mission more difficult because I had to slow my pace down to match hers. Pretended I had a limp. Bitchface got a Subway and sat on the steps of the State Library. Unfortunately she didn't choke on her meatballs. She won't choke on Stephen's balls either. I've seen budgies with bigger testicles than him. Marble-bollocked bastard.

Saturday July 5, 2008

Another stare-off with the canvas. Guess who won.

Sunday July 6, 2008

Mark took me to Luna Park today. Don't think I was very good company though. Made one little boy cry when my ice cream accidentally fell on his head. Ironically the first time I've laughed since seeing bitchface and turdhole in the Chinese restaurant. Got out of there quickly before the mum – a burly looking sort who dwarfed the dad – realised what was going on.

Thought about what John said about people putting their egos onto one another. It's a form of abuse, I think, and it's what Stephen used to do to me. He always had issues with the size and build of his body and used to get bullied at school because he was skinny. He always claimed he was over it, but all those years of humiliation in the changing rooms made him angry and resentful. This is what he brought to our relationship: he undermined me at every stage of the way and battered my self-esteem until it was a slushy pulp. I, like him, never fought back and stood up for myself. I was more like an object of catharsis than a partner to him. When I think about it, people

have always trodden me into the ground. Do I ask for this because I am passive? Am I living in a world where only strong, aggressive personalities can survive? There was nothing strong in what Stephen did to me and I feel his aggression serves only to take him further away from where he wants to be. His affair with Trudy is proof of that!

Monday July 7, 2008

Bitchface is a no-show. With any luck she's been beaten up by a desperate immigrant, buried in a bureaucratic coma or else she realised what a cunt she is and threw herself off the twenty-first floor. Maybe Stephen's given her an STD and her mouth is full of warts. After thirty minutes I aborted the stake out and returned to my studio where I shuffled things meaninglessly around my desk, glued collages together and had another staring match with my dust-ridden canvas. I ended up writing: "Stephen's a weasel" across it in large, scrawny writing and hung it on the wall for a few moments until I heard footsteps in the corridor.

Went to the art shop to buy a new canvas.

Tuesday July 8, 2008

Bitchface is wearing lipstick (to cover up her cold-sores?) and blusher today. She looks like a cheap hooker; I've never seen her so tarted up. I followed her into a small laneway, having to crouch behind a stinky wheelie bin to avoid detection. She scanned around to see if anyone was watching before disappearing into a restaurant. Through the window I saw Stephen. His crooked nose looked even larger and more disfigured than I remembered. They held hands. I held my camera. Snap. A brush of the thigh. Snap. And then a definite grope. Clickety-click, hands off his dick! A kiss on the lips, a little footsie under the table and my lens was steaming up. Their last kiss definitely had tongue in it. Now I'm going to put my foot in it. Suddenly I'm looking forward to Slime-on's birthday celebration on the weekend. My anger's gone, replaced by the satisfactory glow of imminent revenge. Two birds with one stone – more like two rats with a boulder.



After making up a bullshit excuse that I'm ill, I fob Trudy off; for the first time in over two years we don't keep our Wednesday lunchtime date. Relief sweeps over me like rain across the city. No longer will I have to sit opposite that po-faced cow and feign interest in her life. After Slime-on's birthday party our ties will be severed for good.

I meet John and again wonder what nearby people must think of our strange interaction – especially the waiters and shop attendants who have seen us do this six times before.

'I've been thinking about what you said,' I say to John. 'About other people forcing their egos on you. It's amazing how you don't even realise they're doing it. You just assume there's something wrong with you.'

John nods. 'It's easy to immerse ourselves in other people's emotions. What's difficult to see is how our

perception of the world is tainted when this happens – it's like viewing life through tinted glasses.'

'Like when I'm frustrated,' I say, making my hands into claws. 'Everyone I see around me is frustrated.'

John purses his lips and holds his hand up, so his palm is near my face. 'People are mirrors,' he says, moving it. 'The energy you put out is the energy you attract.'

We walk along in silence until we reach the baguette shop, my head strangely quiet of questions. For some reason they don't seem necessary this week.

On reaching the chessboard a man wanders over and starts chatting with us. He doesn't introduce himself and starts a dialogue about how much he hates chess, explaining that he loves movement and detests anything that's still. He claims to speak thirteen languages and is the son of an Egyptian diplomat. I comment about his case on wheels and he reaches into it and produces a fluffy yellow duck which he then gives to me. He leaves us in the knowledge that he's off to make marmalade based on a 150-year-old Scottish recipe.

I scowl as we pass the Chinese restaurant and John catches this in the reflection of the glass. He also makes a funny face which involves pulling his bottom lip high over his top one and cocking one eyebrow higher than the other. We laugh and carry on to a café in which we see a woman in dark sunglasses who looks miserable. Perhaps she's been crying. I tell John she looks like she's about to go on a crazy spree, pull out a knife and start stabbing people. Why does my mind lead to the morose? (Too many years in the depressing company of Stephen I suppose). John hopes this isn't the lead story in this afternoon's newspapers.

We do a lap past smelly garbage and walk down the penultimate laneway before the walk's end. It's wet and moss grows on the walls. The sides of the buildings are covered with air conditioning units and other contraptions that look like they're made out of odd bits of junk and motors. They look like metallic cysts, abnormal growths which add to the ugliness of the buildings down here. Amongst the rubbish I notice a small, feeble bird who builds a nest out of discarded cigarette butts and rubble. I see myself in this small creature, flying around frantically while trying to make the best of the scraps the city gives her. The result is a mutation of something that should be natural but is not; her nest is contrived but it's the best that can be achieved under the circumstances.

As if John is reading my mind, he deviates from the script and talks about how man manipulates nature for his own gain. This discussion is too big for the laneway we're in and so we leave both behind and make our way to the Women's Hospital where John's uncanny tram timing is in syncopation once again.

This week I don't feel the need to capture him before he runs for the tram; I'm content to just let him go. He senses this I think, by casually boarding and riding off to wherever his world needs him to be.

I sit in silence for a while, watching the people of Lonsdale St scurry eagerly about their business. I imagine they are like the thoughts in my mind, speeding around without purpose or direction.

Two weeks left with John. I wonder if I'll see him after this series of walks comes to an end, and if I do what it will be like when our conversation has no restriction. This thought is like a rose amongst the nettles and

I luxuriate myself in it. Perhaps this is his mysterious gift to me: a present of the present; time spent with somebody where there is no need to spend time.



Trudy wasn't going to be very appreciative of my gift to Slime-on. Borrowing a projector from the studio and armed with six relationship-ending photographs, I set off to the function room Trudy had hired to put on my first exhibition in almost a year. The birthday was being held in an English-style stone-brick building at a (s)wanky golf club. Lofty rafters gave it a ye-olde-world feel and huge French windows opened out to a small lake. It was time to take Trudy's advice and "make use of a useless degree to do something... creative". It was time to prove to her how art, in whatever form it manifests, can reach out to people and evoke (or should that be provoke?) emotions.

One by one Slime-on's mates stood up and made inane speeches about how much of a geezer he was; his propensity for dropping his trousers and mooning at bouncers, how he could down a pint in seven seconds and how he could belch the Australian national anthem. Trudy sat there looking less than impressed. When it came to my turn her face matched the colour of the cherry red tablecloths. The cheering suddenly stopped and gave way to astonished gasps—with odd sprigs of laughter—and then a tumultuous outburst from Slime-on. He overturned the table he was sitting at and berated Trudy until she was a shrivelling pile of mucus and shame. In that moment I felt sorry for her but it soon passed and I packed up my projector and left the room in chaos.

Coupled with my head-in-cake-dunking outburst at Stephen's birthday party, I'd now firmly cemented a reputation as birthday party wrecker extraordinaire. Mark later commented I should set up a venture to pursue my new-found talent and offered to design business cards. Whether Trudy scarpered to be with her newly-acquired talent (in the loosest sense of the word) I was unsure. What was certain was that we wouldn't be sharing a bowl of noodles any time soon. And if we did one of us would inevitably end up wearing them.



Wednesday July 16, 2008

Something happened today. I think I forgot to flip the 'on' switch in my brain when I awoke after two hours' sleep. On the eve of my assignment handing-in deadline my computer crashed and I lost a 4,965-word rant on the Art of Disorder. This prompted a frantic evening of burning midnight oil and copious cigarettes until, at 4.18am I'd salvaged some semblance of what I'd written previously and had stitched together a ramshackle paper which was just as disorderly as the subject matter.

John greeted me with his usual trademark smile but all I had in return was a caffeine-induced wince which involved baring my teeth and staring like my eyelids were jammed open.

We began our walk in uncharacteristic silence. The usual flurry of questions tumbling from my mouth had dried up in a mind drought. John bounded and I traipsed. All our moments and memories were fumbled. The only constant was the shitting pigeon.

We headed into the library and I was entirely aware of how distracted my mind was at this point. Everything happened as a variable of the cumulative experiences we've had, up until we reached the pipes at Cocker Alley. At this point, seemingly on cue, we were entertained by a dancing rat which threw itself against the wall before lurching towards us. I freaked out a little (fragile nerves today) while John watched it with amusement.

We turned into Swanston Street and John started talking about Coca-Cola and how a better fizzy drink to go with Japanese would be... apple juice... or some kind of fizzy lychee concoction. We were both a bit odd today. John was more animated than usual. For the first time there was a real degree of expression about his retelling. He was far more... human than he's been before. At times I think he wanted to clobber me over the head for being such a lame excuse for a walking partner.

Most things that we'd talked about or had happened in previous weeks weren't recalled. At least I was aware of markers and places of things that had occurred but I merely recognised them in my mind and moved on. It's like we were just passing through time and space again and again and again... just like going through the motions. If this was a relationship then it would probably be referred to as the 'seven year itch'.

As we approached the end of the walk the conversation was a shallow fragment of what it was originally. I figured that if we ever attempted an honest re-creation of week one then this walk would take eight hours.

John and I spent a fair amount of time bumping into each other today. The intimacy formed through the ridiculousness of this experience, my apparent apathy and John's public dancing (an imitation of the rat) broke down some barriers that may have existed in our first walk. Despite my grouchy disposition I felt like my interactions with John, despite their repetitive nature, are helping me to rediscover the beauty of life, although I'm not sure how.

We bade each other farewell and I said: 'Next week – walk eight, the final one' to which John replied: 'But I only met you an hour ago'. Then he disappeared onto his tram (which was also out of sync today) and I walked back to my studio where I drilled 500 holes in the sides of small, white wooden boxes—a school project—and to wonder if I was always so strange.



Footsteps on the stairs. I flip my drawing pad shut and quickly put my pencil back in its case. Whoever it is passes my studio and keeps walking. I re-approach the drawing pad with caution, as if it's a bomb and I'm a disposal officer. I pause, suddenly wondering why I'm so embarrassed about what's inside. It's my first drawing in such a long time and I'm afraid to look at it, afraid that I'll think it's rubbish.

I bite into a sushi roll, quickly dabbing the sides of my mouth with a serviette – there's probably no mess—it's sushi after all—but it's best to be safe. I wipe my fingers which creep like spider's legs towards my

drawing pad and peek inside, feeling like a child looking under the bed for her Christmas presents.

'What are you up to?' says Mark. He breezes into the studio.

I jump and my reflexes slam the pad shut.

'Do you have cushions on the soles of your feet or something?' I ask, patting my chest in an effort to calm my heart.

Mark raises a leg and plonks a size thirteen Doc Marten on the end of my desk. 'Not exactly the footwear of a stealth assassin.' He lowers his foot and eyes the pad with intrigue. 'What were you looking at?'

'I think I was staring into space.'

'You've drawn something.'

'So what if I have?'

'Show me.'

I take the pad and clutch it to my chest.

'You're embarrassed?'

'No.'

'Then show me. I don't care if it's crap – which it won't be because you've drawn it – I'm just glad you're drawing again.' He leans on the desk. 'Perhaps we can frame it for my exhibition.'

I rise from my chair. 'I've got to go now.'

'Which roughly translated means: get out of my studio.' He grins. 'I'm only going to look in there once you've gone.'

'Fine,' I say, throwing the pad on the table and putting on my jacket. 'Look if you want.'

Mark snatches it up and leafs to the page where I've drawn a caricature. 'Who's this?'

'The guy I've been walking with for the last seven weeks.'

Mark is silent for a few moments before replying: 'He's covered in symbolism,' he says. 'Decorated himself in it from head to toe. Do you know what any of this stuff means?'

'I wasn't aware it meant anything.'

'It must do.' Mark taps his chin with an index finger. 'There are clear symbols here: an umbrella, a wheel, two fishes around his neck...'

'He could be a Pisces.'

'Why has he got a conch in his hand?'

'He busks.'

'And the casket?'

'To collect money.'

'He's an interesting looking guy.' Mark puts the pad up against the wall. 'We should hang this in my exhibition. I like it.'

'I have to go.'

'The last meeting?'

My stomach pangs with nerves. 'I'll see you later.'

Today's walk brings with it mixed feelings. While I'm looking forward to seeing John, a nagging intuition says this will be the last time our paths will cross. I can't explain where this inkling comes from, just like I can't fathom what exactly has happened over the last two months. There have been changes in me, subtle adjustments which have made me more momentary. At last I feel like I'm pulling myself out of the wreckage of my relationship with Stephen; it makes beautiful sense that Trudy and he are together.

My heart beats faster than usual and I almost sprint up Centre Way to the meeting place. After a few moments of anxiety which strangely mirror the feelings I felt on the first walk, John appears and we begin. We share an edgy silence which John, it seems, is not anticipating. I can see him out of the corner of my eye, looking at me as if he expects me to say something. I maintain the silence until it's time for the script to begin for the final time.

We pop out of Centre Way and cross Flinders Lane. Here we normally turn left and head to the library, but today is going to be different – whether John likes it or not.

I insist we turn right and walk down Degraeves Street. John looks at me with a curious expression and I'm worried I'll have to fight him to get my way, but I don't.

We set off down Degraeves and I remove one of my gloves and hand it to him. I remove the second and ask if he can hold it as well. By the time we reach the end of Degraeves Street and are standing at the top of the subway entrance, I have handed my jacket and scarf to John. We walk down into the subway and there's barely anyone around. I hand him my bag. We look at displays in the Platform window and I take off my shoes and swap into a pair of high-heeled boots. I look around. There's a guy sitting on a seat at the end of the walkway and two police officers who disappear around the corner. I take off my sweater and hand this John who stands next to me like a butler, neatly folding my clothes over his arm as I discard them. I reach behind my dress and unzip it, allowing it to drop to the ground. John raises his eyebrows. Underneath my dress I'm wearing new pants which are rolled up to the knee, as well as a new top. My shoes are also new. I unroll my trouser legs and straighten up. John smiles broadly, clearly enjoying the experience – as is the man on the seat at the other end of the subway. 'Can you do that again?' he calls out as a train rattles into the station. Unsure as to where it's heading, John and I get on and ride it for eight stops before walking into a park.

We sit on an embankment and look out to a lake. 'So what's this all about?' I ask.

John picks a blade of grass and twiddles it between his fingers. 'I'm still trying to figure that out myself.'

'What were the walks for?'

John holds the grass between his thumbs, purses his lips and blows on the blade of grass. A high-pitched whine pierces my ears.

'For years that's how I felt inside,' he says. 'Stuck in an unconscious routine where all I did was get up and wish for tomorrow. I was never happy where I was and constantly found myself reaching for things: a fancy car, material objects to clutter my house and loose women to fulfil my sexual ego. It all brought temporary satisfaction, but the truth was I just wanted to be able to express myself. Society inhibited me and there was seemingly no outlet for this expression – at least none where anyone would properly listen. I began to feel more and more disengaged from everyone and everything.' John points to the city reflected in the water of the lake. 'In this concrete construct our feelings come second and we are taught to focus on money. They say it's the driving force of everything, but all it did was lead me down a dead-end street.'

A flock of geese fly in triangular formation above our heads.

'One day I saw an advert in the paper and it intrigued me. It talked about being in the moment. At that point I realised why I felt so ungrounded all the time – I lived my life in the troubles of the past or else worried about the future. I had no appreciation of this...'

John runs his hands through the grass and inhales deeply. He closes his eyes as a zephyr skims across the water and tickles our faces. 'Isn't this just perfect?'

I study his profile once more. 'I think so.'

He opens his eyes and looks at me. 'Eight walks later and my outlook had changed, not massively at first, but it put me on the path to something greater. The Theory of the Remoment helped me embrace the repetition of many conscious moments until I realised a sameness of being.'

I sense a theological discussion in the wings. Hopefully it flies off with the geese. 'What do you mean?' I ask tentatively.

'We're all governed by the same constant. I don't want to sound cheesy, but it's an inexplicable energy that flows through all of us. Our minds create barriers to prevent us from accessing this energy, but once we strip away the layers of our ego and put our personalities aside, there is an abundance of happiness to be experienced. Allowing myself to be in remoment has helped me realise the mind is an illusion.'

John throws the blade of grass away.

'Hopefully the walks have helped you to focus your mind when it starts to wander and made you realise you can observe your thoughts without having to be trapped by them.'

I pick a daisy and start pulling off the petals. 'Lots of thoughts came up during the walks that I wanted to indulge in – but I couldn't. It was frustrating.'

'Did you manage to maintain momentary experience?'

'After a while, I suppose.'

'Then you're getting closer to becoming a butterfly.'

The sun disappears behind a cloud and I think about the gift John mentioned in week one but stop myself from asking him what it is. I think I already have it.