

REALITY

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When you know what I have done, you will want to judge me. I know you will. I am neither evil nor benign. What I have done is no more malevolent than innocent. I am a product of my time. These days we cast aside pointless moralities and received opinions. Instead we crave opportunities to exercise our freedom. I have merely exercised mine.

I'm going to tell you this story. It's about these people – I think you may have heard of them.

Kathleen Alice Theresa Murdoch

Garry Troy Scoresby

Hannah Esther Temple Baumgarten

Julia Lee

Mario Nikita Martinelli

Dr Robert Guy Mills Hetherington

My story took a year to unfold. A year ago these were ordinary people. Not special in any way. Not suspecting I had something planned for them.

To them it seemed like an ordinary early summer Sunday when it began. But I knew better. Sunday is where my story begins.

REALITY CONCEIVED

1 PROGRESS

It was good coming over for the job. I achieved a lot. From time to time, doubts crept in about what I'd really changed in the face of such appalling bureaucracy. But I shrugged them off. Let's face it – the Department was a demolition job. I had to take it apart piece by piece. It turned out to be much worse than I'd been led to believe. Every time I touched something, the foundations were rotten underneath.

From the very beginning they knew I'd arrived. Things changed big time. Some of them didn't like it, but they grudgingly admitted it had to be done. But, the rest of them. Jesus. They were the kind who wouldn't know if their arse was on fire.

I didn't make myself popular. But then, I don't set out to be Mr Nice Guy. If people won't face facts, that's their look out.

All in all, it went pretty well. The smart ones could see what I'd achieved. More importantly, the Minister was happy. She thought what I was doing mattered.

It didn't, of course. What counted was that I was in a new city. And a new city is a perfect place for delicious diversions.

2 EDGY

Kathleen felt that telltale frisson of excitement at the prospect of her meeting. This case had come her way in circumstances she still barely understood. She found it all intriguing. Lovely and edgy.

She arrived early at Milkd – her favourite coffee hangout. She loved everything about the place. Sarah and Pablo knew her by name and would have her double shot skinny cap ready almost before she sat down. The décor was funky and cute. There were brightly coloured tables and chairs on the footpath and the prices were written neatly on the blackboard menu as 20 without the cents.

She liked her hip neighbourhood too. The Perth metro area has five or six of these suburbs at its core. Kathleen imagined cool places like these to be circling their wagons against cultural attack from the city's endless urban sprawl.

Yes, she loved that feeling when life might be teetering precariously on the edge. She sipped absent-mindedly at her arabica blend and passed the time checking in with friends online and checking out the guys passing by. Some of the dudes showed signs of a heavy Saturday night. She felt a bit musty round the edges herself.

Fortunately, Matt had been satisfied that morning with a sleepy wake-up fuck and then had made himself scarce so she could concentrate on work. Concentrate on the new client that serendipity had dropped right in her lap. She was up for this meeting and saw from her reflection in the shop window that she looked great. It wasn't her fault she was a budding hot-shot lawyer who looked damn hot.

3 THE SHITS

I remember waking up on that Sunday morning fair quivering in anticipation. It was exciting. After so much planning and preparation, the day of days had finally arrived. The initial phase of the Master Plan was now complete. I was more than satisfied with the overall approach, the strategies and the individual tactics. We were moving into the implementation stage.

Then I spoke to Mark and that stuffed everything. I was up for some positive diversion on this auspicious day, but instead I got Mark-style negative frustration. I knew when I came over here that hanging out with Mark again would give me the total shits. Just my luck that the only old friend I had on the west coast of Australia would be unreliability personified.

I had a great day planned out. I would go to the gym, draft the discussion paper for the following day's Executive Management meeting and then relax and unwind over a couple of drinks with Mark. But then the *Markness* intervened. He texted me to say he couldn't make it to the pub as certain things had cropped up.

What things? Mark didn't have a real job. He didn't even really have a life.

4 MOONLIGHTING

Garry came to around seven thirty on Sunday morning. He opened the blinds to a blast of dazzling sunlight. It was going to be a hot one. He liked his brick and tile house. His wife and kids had their lounge and family room and he had his double lock-up garage with space to park the boat and set up his workbench. Average family home or not, it cost an arm and a leg in Perth and the mortgage repayments were getting out of hand.

Garry was determined to have Sunday free of thoughts of money troubles. He wondered if this could be the beginning of summer at last. The morning easterly was full of promise and his thoughts wandered to getting the boat ready for action. Then he remembered how much he hated the routine of hitching the boat to the trailer, carting it down to the boat ramp, waiting for a lifetime to launch it and then going through the whole bullshit again in reverse just to get home.

He remembered not to forget he had a quote to do for an old lady later that day. Sunday or not, he thought, a fireman's two or three jobs are never done.

He considered re-entering the battle zone called kids eating breakfast but there was no way he was volunteering for a further tour of duty in Perthghanistan. He had served his country yesterday so Kirsty could go shopping with the girls. Today, leave in the form of reading the Sunday paper was the least he deserved.

He slipped quietly from the heavily fortified barracks of the bedroom but didn't get far before ambush from enemy fire.

No, sweetheart, I can't take the kids to your Mum's. I have to do that quote I told you about. Garry pecked her on the cheek, groped her still-cute bum and made a run for it.

5 ABOUT ME

I think it's helpful if you get to know me.

I'm an analytical person so I encourage understanding. Understanding breeds appreciation. Please don't confuse my desire for understanding with a quest for your approval. That really is of no consequence to me.

I've been told I have winning ways. Sometimes it's called charm or even charisma. People like me in spite of themselves. Remember the kid at school who was good at everything? Remember how hard you tried to hate him? But you couldn't, could you? That kid was me.

When I do things, I do them well. Actually I do them better than anybody else. It stems from innate ability but it's more than that. I'm more driven than other people. It's genes and guts. It's the deadly duo of nature and nurture humming like a well-oiled machine.

On reflection, I can see that having a drunken, degenerate bum for a father was the best thing that ever happened to me. Obviously, it didn't seem that way at the time. Certainly not when he beat Mum up and scared me so much that I shit my pants.

My dad would drink away the rent money and terrorise the neighbours, so we found ourselves constantly on the move from one rental to another. From time to time, he would 'go away' and Mum would drag me to see him in Melbourne's Pentridge Prison. I can still remember how cold it was there. Even in the heat of summer, those thick stone walls and inmate stares chilled me to the bone.

When I say my *dad* was like that, he was the man I called *Dad*. I never met my actual father nor was I told a thing about him. My mum kept up the pretence about my paternity throughout my childhood, but Axe (yeah, he was huge) made sure I was reminded when he and I were alone that I was literally a pathetic little bastard.

Mum remained fiercely loyal to the abomination of a man I was forced to call Dad, as do so many women who've been battered by their so-called men. I speculate that my real father was a Greek

or a Turk. I have olive skin and what people describe as swarthy good looks. So I am rather handsome and, as I told you before, I have a certain charm. Axe was neither handsome nor charming. He was an ugly, ignorant brute with all the charm of a spitting cobra.

So my childhood experiences weren't great. But I am thankful for them now as I can trace my toughness and determination back to those formative years. All in all, I'm a self-made man. Maybe this will help you understand what drives me to be the very best.

Let me share something else to put you in the picture. I crave admiration. Don't confuse that with approval. I use words precisely and I do mean *admiration*. The admiration I refer to is the shock and awe reaction when people witness amazing things. I'm the kind of guy who wants to take your breath away. I want you to marvel at me. Like when the dashing hero rescues the damsel in distress. Or when the thief brazenly robs the bank in broad daylight.

As a consequence of moving from house to house, I also had to constantly change schools. Thanks to my indifferent home life, I was malnourished and always the weediest kid in my class. Interestingly enough, I was never bullied. When they first saw me, the Neanderthals in the back row would lick their lips. At the first opportunity, they would get me alone in the playground to do their worst. The funny thing was they never did. They would look at me and I would look at them. They were bristling with menace and I was supposed to be scared. The trouble was, I wasn't.

I've thought about this a lot over the years. Why didn't they go ahead and bash me? The fact is they were scared of me and not the other way around. Gradually, I would weave those boys under my spell. Before too long I would become their leader and they would do my bidding. At that time, neither they nor I could understand why.

As I made my way through university in Melbourne, the influence I had over others endured. Not that I was threatened physically by anyone. Instead we competed for the grades and the girls and the crown of king of the cool. I took what I wanted and I was the sun around which all the lesser planets orbited. If anything, the force field has progressively strengthened. These

days I can fully harness the attraction. My gravitational pull is simply irresistible.

I'm confident I can get what I want. Working out what I'm going to attempt is the trickier thing. But, once I found myself here in Perth, a new man as it were, I quickly found a purpose. Something that would interest me and challenge me and justify the move to Wait-Awhile WA. Something that would combine tower rescue with bank robbery.

It all started in earnest on the very Sunday you're reading about now.

6 MAYBE A LITTLE IRREGULAR

Robert loved this time of the year now the weather was really warming up again. He sheltered his eyes from the rising sun as he waited to brief the new guy on the mass of maintenance work around the property that was now way overdue. Things were getting out of hand and that's why so much activity had overtaken his Sunday morning.

Robert and Jack introduced themselves to each other and exchanged pleasantries. Robert had just joked for the millionth time that being a gynaecologist was like being a mechanic, but with a much better view. He chuckled to himself as he always did. Luckily, Marjorie wasn't there to tell him off this time.

He oriented Jack to the features of the site. There were paddocks with sheep to do the gardening, rows of fruit trees in the scenic valley, verdelho and chenin blanc grapes planted in the perfect terroir of the gravelly, loam soil and a market garden area let to the neighbours. One hundred hectares with breathtaking views was bloody great, he told him, but having no time to do things was a problem. A busy practice, you see. The basic maintenance was getting him down, let alone the hassles with the hopeless people from the viticulture collective who were supposed to be developing his vineyard. Perhaps he was getting old, he thought, but fifty-four isn't that old these days. The new forty-four, he said to himself, as ever amused at his own joke.

Robert left Jack to it and wandered back towards the house. He noticed that the BMW Sports Z4 needed a clean. He wondered if he could fit in a clean-and-go before his appointment. It was a little irregular to see a patient on a Sunday, but she seemed desperate. She also sounded alluring. Her verdelho voice conjured up lime and honeysuckle so intensely that he could almost taste it.

At worst, it would provide a decent excuse to drop into the bar. Owning a bar by the river was fun. Something to play with, Marjorie said. Cruel but fair. Nothing wrong with a bit of fun, especially when there were young girls to ogle. It was a licence to print money too. Yes, the bar was a winner all round.

7 BRAVE NEW WORLD

When I told people I was leaving Melbourne, they were shocked. To go to Perth of all places, that made them laugh. That's what they're like in Melbourne. Superior and complacent.

The trouble is, complacency suffocates risk. The complacent classes, with silver spoons stuffed in their mouths, would rather choke on them than taste freedom. But people like me aren't afraid to take a chance. We boldly go where we've never gone before. We star-trek to another city where we know no one (except for Mark, who is too unreliable to count).

Despite the sneering looks on the faces of my colleagues, I could tell they were jealous as hell. To get head-hunted from interstate to run a whole Department, a whole service for the entire State – that was something they would only ever have dreamed of for themselves.

They thought I was heading West just for work. They didn't know it was also an escape. Not from anything bad or from any sort of scandal but more so from the confines of myself. People like me can get dragged down and diminished by the stifling conventionality of a smug, established city.

What better place to allow the spirit to run free than the most isolated capital city in the world? Where better than a new frontier to explore one's potential for great things?

8 THAT IT SHOULD COME TO THIS

Hannah couldn't understand how she got to be eighty-two. That was no great surprise. Last year, she couldn't understand how she got to be eighty-one.

When she looked ruefully in the mirror that Sunday morning, a withered old lady looked back. Inside she was still herself as she had always been, but now she was locked inside some ghastly shell.

People often commented that she still had her marbles. Hannah resented this ageism just as she had rejected racism and sexism before it. Not only was she anti the *isms*, she was one of those pioneering women who led the movements against them.

And yet it should come to this. Only a few years ago, she would have done the work herself. She renovated her own bathroom when she was seventy-five and it got her headlines in the local newspaper. Some achievement that – to be a DIY celebrity in the *Community News*! That's what currently passes for fame for a world-renowned Viennese pianist, celebrated Jungian psychiatrist, revered feminist flag-bearer and refugee from the Nazis, whose entire family had been butchered before her eyes.

She didn't waste time on regretting the past but, justifiably, she had come to resent the present. How cruel it was for a woman like her to have to ask a man for help. Now what time was the young man coming round again? It was written on that scrap of paper near the telephone table in the hall. Here it is. Damn these infernal glasses. Here we go. Two o'clock.

9 MARK

I spent a fair bit of time with Mark when I first came over. At first I wasn't entirely sure why. I thought it might have been out of nostalgia. But I soon realised that it stemmed from what you might call forensic curiosity. For me, spending time with Mark was like looking at the world through one-way glass, paradoxically coupled with the reflective benefit of looking in a mirror. When I was there with Mark, I was a dispassionate observer of life. Strangely, that helped me develop and realise self.

He seemed pleased to have me around in that special Mark way. That merely meant that my presence was, on balance, welcome. If I'd told him I was heading straight back to Melbourne, he would have shrugged his shoulders and said what time do you leave?

Mark hadn't changed much from university days but then I guess none of us do. It's not hard to understand why parents find it all so depressing. They enslave themselves to their kids for twenty years, fork out a small fortune to bring them up and then the brats turn out just like they were going to anyway.

As the Britney generation would say, Mark's parents would so-ooo feel like that. I once came over to Perth and visited him in their impressive house in their leafy suburb. Mark's parents spent the whole time apologising for him. A genius he was without a doubt, but he was as erratic and lazy as he was brilliant.

I was the only one amongst our college mates who had much time for him. I enjoyed Mark mainly because he could mount lucidly philosophical arguments even when drunk or stoned. Being a cynical bastard, he didn't believe in much. That gave him the intellectual freedom to adopt the best available argument for any issue at hand. The amazing thing was that his bullshit lines from the night before weren't actually bullshit in the morning. I would shake my head in wonder at how someone so fucked up could conceive an argument that was so fucking brilliant.

So there I was – reunited with Mr Unreliable himself. And do you know what? The experience helped open my eyes. I wouldn't

tell him that because he wouldn't be interested. Anyway he probably wouldn't listen.

But, credit where it's due, Mark set me on my incredible new path. It was at the weird and wonderful University of Mark that I discovered how diverting my new life in the Australian backwater could be. Mark gave me the vision for how I might entertain myself over here and, more importantly, how my talents and capabilities could be honed to their sharpest points.

10 NOT A FATHER'S SON

Mario inspected his thinning hairline in the bathroom mirror. He looked like shit, that was his conscious thought. Never mind about that. More importantly, was he receding faster now? Still, looking on the bright side, the hair he had left was good and black, with not a hint of grey.

He'd been told that sons inherit heads of hair from their fathers. His father was bald as a coot, dammit. But, hey, Mario was nothing like his father. Joe was a retired market gardener, a rabid communist in his day, short and thick-set, content to eat *spaghetti* with *polpetti* every day and happy to drink coffee with the same old *paesani* forever and a day.

Mario saw himself as the exact opposite. A risk-taker, an opportunist, someone who could see a good thing and grab it. Very good with the ladies, as indeed he was last night; not real good with the ex-wife. A loveable rogue, that's what they called him.

Sundays weren't his favourite day, not by a long way. For on that hallowed day, duty called for a man with no sense of duty. The plan as usual was to clap eyes on the Bitch for as short a time as possible, disengage the kids from the apron strings and then take them down to Macca's for some real kids food. Be smart this time, Mario my son, don't tell them any secrets to parrot back to the Bitch.

After returning the poor kids from day release to the Bitch's detention centre, he would trek down to Mum and Dad's, drop off and collect some washing, eat too much and try to think of something to say to them.

No, not his favourite day, especially in the current circumstances. Maybe he had overstepped the mark this time. Perhaps he was playing out of his league. Don't think like that, Mario reminded himself. Things will work out. After all, this was him he was talking to. But he was getting anxious and his palms were sweaty like they were when he'd been in trouble at school.

Still, he had done something about the problem now. He had jumped on his bike and started pedalling fast. No time like

the present, he'd said, I'd like my appointment yesterday. He'd bunged on the urgency in the time-honoured fashion mastered by all Italians to jump queues. And it had worked. He would take back control of his life this very day.

11 RELIGION

I'm not sure what Mark would have done if he hadn't been lucky. Or was it talented or both? Anyway, for whatever reason, his mega-wealthy dad gave him a bunch of shares and the cosmos gave online share trading to the world. Mark used these gifts to good effect. Very good effect, actually. He made mega-bucks. When he got up before trading closed, that is.

I was pleased for him when I heard about it, genuinely pleased. I'm not naturally so generous of spirit. I just recognised that Mark would have gone loopy if he'd been expected to make an ordinary living like everyone else.

Given the extremely short working hours he kept, Mark was always available. After he'd forgotten to turn up at the pub once or twice, I would arrange to see him at his place. I preferred the unique chaos of what Mark called home to waiting round like a loser some girl had stood up.

It came as no surprise to discover that Mark's world, when he wasn't sleeping, stoned or 'working', revolved around TV. He was addicted to *The Simpsons* and split the rest of his viewing time between terrible old movies, obscure documentaries and reality shows involving ordinary folk cast into extraordinary situations.

I'm normally moralistic about TV. As a child, I didn't have the luxury of sitting around. As an adult, TV strikes me as an utter and pathetic waste of time. Why else would people feel the need to make excuses for watching it? You hear them claim not to watch it much. I only watch the ABC, they say. I bet these people only buy *Playboy* for the articles.

Yet TV came to fascinate me. In the bizarre company of Mark, I let myself succumb to the experience without resistance or guilt. I caught myself actually enjoying it. I realised that I wasn't enjoying watching the programs as such. It was more that I was enjoying the experience of watching TV with Mark.

I was like a novice introduced to a new religion. Seeing something of what the true devotees were seeing but with new and different eyes. In the company of Mark, I suspended

judgment and I didn't criticise. I just lived life for a while through a different catechism – a spiritual posture second nature to others, yet totally alien to me.

12 FOLLOWING ADVICE

Out on court one, Angelica was thrashing her hapless opponent with her customary casual arrogance, while on one of the outer courts, young Jasmine was fighting tooth and nail to match it with a much better player.

Julia felt guilty about the way her older daughter treated each new adversary with such disdain. This emotion battled against the pride she felt that Angie had inherited her figure, looking a picture of blonde perfection in her little tennis skirt. But guilt won in straight sets as she looked at poor Jasmine. She was stocky and dark like her dad, but carried it, regrettably, with none of his self-confidence.

It was a cracker of a day. From the tennis club, there was a gorgeous view of the sea and today it was like glass, thanks to the easterly morning breeze doing its early summer thing. This was the view she could get from their upstairs entertaining veranda. She adored it and she would never tire of it.

Although the vistas were totally different, the experience of looking out across the water reminded her of childhood and the smelly green and yellow ferries that plied Sydney Harbour. Julia's early years were framed around keeping up old-money Sydney appearances and concealing the sad truth of their barren family life. Her mother was a busy socialite, flitting between tennis at the club, charity performances and cocktail parties. Her father was hardly ever at home, working long hours and travelling interstate and overseas, building his reputation as the leading Australian avant-garde architect of the post-war era.

Julia grew up to be a beautiful young lady, a virtual clone of her own mother. She was blonde and blue-eyed, with a taste for classic twinset fashion. Outwardly Julia was serene and respectable, but inwardly she blazed with anger. Julia recognised and resented her parents' neglect from a young age. She was happy to take all the material pleasures her life offered, but deep down she felt like an orphan in her own home. In later life, she reflected on how the breathtaking architecture of the house had deflected the eye and the attention of the viewer from the true

nature of the household. The toilets throughout the mansion were constructed with glass walls. They looked magnificent and modern, but to live with them was a misery of embarrassment. While the imaginative design filled the house with light, none of it penetrated her soul.

Julia was one of three sisters. Her oldest sister was more like a mother to her, working in partnership with the nannies and housekeeper to run the house. Julia was far and away the prettiest of the three and, maybe because she was the youngest, was also the most wilful and rebellious. Naturally, there were tensions and jealousies between the sisters. Most of the disquiet was directed at her.

Curiously, all three girls serially dated one particular guy. In retrospect, Julia saw this as a re-run of Cinderella, with Prince Charming working his way down the list until he came to the most dazzling of the three. As in all good fairy stories, Cinderella ended up marrying the king's son, Prince Stephen in this particular case.

Julia imagined that the white speck of the Bathurst Lighthouse on Rottneest, just visible thanks to the sparkling sunlight, was the tower of a medieval castle. She thought about her decision to marry Stephen. While he had a certain charm, he had been nowhere near the most handsome or wealthy of the boys who courted her. She'd recognised recently that his true appeal lay somewhere else. He'd been appointed to a good job away from Sydney and the fact of the matter was that he could deliver something none of his rivals could. He had the power, indeed the need, to take her away.

Julia jerked herself back to the moment. To the tennis and the girls. But between Angelica's perfect topspin executions and Jasmine's endless chasing down of balls, she could no longer avoid the truth that things had changed between her and Stephen. The thought of the approaching big four-o had probably started it, but she wasn't imagining things. Stephen had recently emerged from a decade of benign indifference and had noticed her slipping away. Why otherwise would this predictable, forty-five year old businessman have pulled the crazy Chinese stunt?

Julia felt sure now that Stephen had sniffed the air and smelled that something with her was not right. His plan was simple – re-tie her to the kitchen sink.

She ignored Angelica's current tantrum at the latest dubious line call from her opponent and wondered if today's appointment was really such a good plan. Especially, conspicuously, on a Sunday of all days.

At this moment she longed for the comforting anonymity of a proper big city. In London, New York, Paris or even Sydney, you don't have to worry that the simplest inquiry, the most basic exploration, will somehow find its way back to you over coffee with the girls or will be broadcast via the old boys' bush telegraph to the nineteenth hole chit-chat over an ice cold beer.

Still, she had badgered the poor man, name-dropped and fluttered her gorgeous eyelashes metaphorically over the phone to secure the unusual appointment. It was all too confusing. Should she go ahead with the meeting? Was it too late to back out?

13 MY LIFE IN THEIR HANDS

I spent a fair while sitting there with Mark in the early days of my new life. Like two blokes in silent harmony bringing to life the beer ads. He would drink a Rogers or a Nail or some such ‘tasty beer’ and I would bring a great shiraz and sip it indulgently by myself. That was the way it was with Mark. You could spend time in his company but you could never be with him. In parallel but not in series.

We viewed. He out of habit and me out of curiosity. I saw average people aspire to non-average lives. I saw people crave to fulfil potential that their low cards in the deal of life would otherwise prevent.

In these people, I saw me, but unfortunately for them, without the driving *me-ness* of me.

I saw people trust unseen and unknown multinational conglomerates with the daily minutiae of their lives. Your life in their hands. Your free will freely given. Signed over in small print contracts that they never bothered to read. YES PLEASE ... I agree that I want to be locked in a house with perfect strangers for months on end. YES ... I want to be sent to a desert island with no food or water. I want to vie for the affections of a rugged but moronic outback farmer. I want to swap my cultured wife for a busty slag whose culinary skills extend as far as heating baked beans.

But, for reasons that I couldn’t at first comprehend, I didn’t mock them. I didn’t scoff. I didn’t shitcan it. I made no comment, even to myself. I got into it. I enjoyed it. It was different. It was what I had come for – a new life!