BEAU MILES

'This guy probably uses a trident and sword for a knife and fork.'
Roko's Basilisk, YouTube subscriber

THE BACKYARD ADVENTURER

Meaningful and pointless expeditions, self-experiments and the value of other people's junk

THE BACKYARD ADVENTURER

BEAU MILES

BRIO

Praise for Beau Miles’ YouTube videos

‘. . . Not a superhuman, but a raw, human, human. He builds things, maintains things, connects easily and wholesomely with others, creates grand dreams and makes them a reality; not only through his execution but the filming and sharing of them with the world, for free . . . ’—Peter Mozuraitis

‘This man is such a good story teller, we are all here voluntarily watching him eat cold beans over and over again.’—JC

‘. . . love your films, inspired by your adventures, I get the giggles from your wit - you are a wise guy and I dig it . . .’—thetalkingfly

‘Honestly I think if everyone lived even a bit like Beau this world would be a better place.’—NiklasStøterau

‘. . . the pure articulation of life and passion of doing that Mr Miles has is extraordinary and inspiring. Taking the simple and making it seem like it’s own adventure is a reflection of life and possibly why this is, hands down, my favorite YouTube channel.’—William

‘The films that come out of this channel are absolutely beautiful (Beau-tiful). They completely display the joy of making stuff and adventuring.’—Jamie Kemp

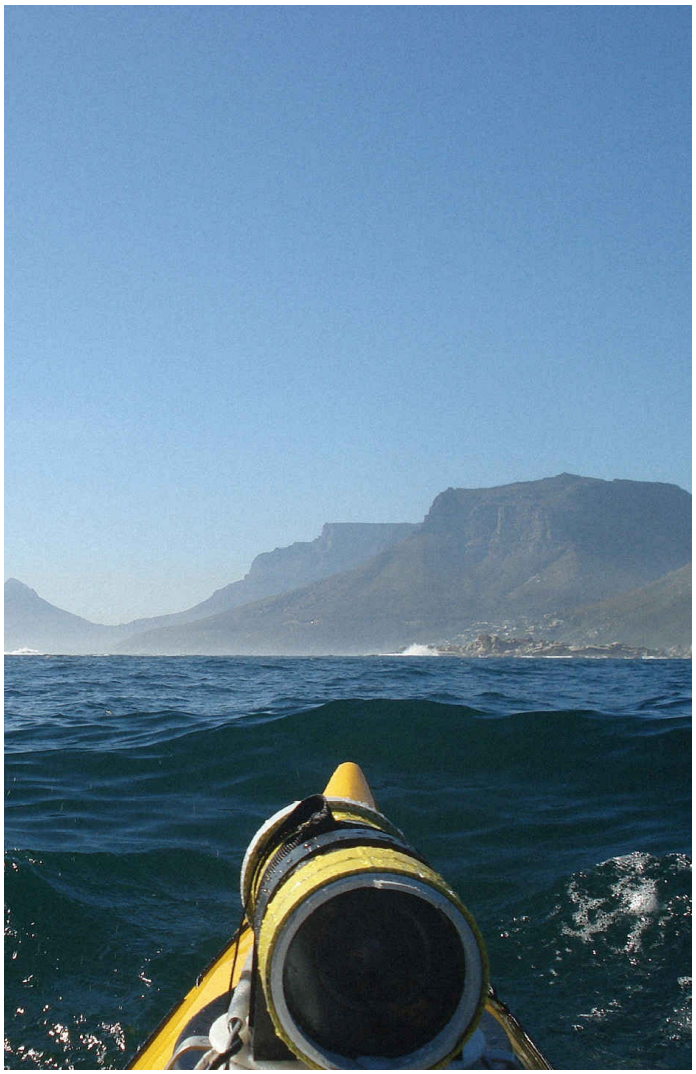
‘“It’s...a bit of fun” he says, about to embark on a pointless, bizarre adventure. This is the attitude I want in my life.’— superdeluxesmell

‘The ease with which this guy jumps over fences. Makes me doubt their functionality.’—ARVIND JIJI ANTONY

‘this guy needs a much larger audience.’—Joshua Murray

This book is dedicated to anyone who has lived a hard life in order to get by. Such people are seldom regarded as adventurers, yet I think they're the mantle-piece characters. I am no such person. I know lots of people who have done it tough, really tough and none of them would ever introduce themselves, write about, hint at, or suggest that they're an 'adventurer', as if such a thing can be a job title.

And to May and Helen, my daughter and wife who have redefined my sense of home, and away. Golly, I've got it good.



BACKSTORY,
OR PRE-BEARD

Day 62 of 135. Africa, 2007. Offshore. Alone.

The world around me looks like a mouldy sponge cake. One that's been left uncovered on a kitchen table for 26 days of stale summer air, enduring two heatwaves and four storms. A cake that had once been freshly creamed, passionfruit drizzled and frosty-topped, but is now a blotched, fuzzy fusion of bacteria and mould; its clearly defined layers, once perky as new mattresses, are now sagging.

The view over the bow of my kayak, my view for seven to ten hours a day, currently due south, would usually be a perfectly clear version of myself silhouetted by the midday sun, but today I cast no shadow. The layers of sea, air and sky are several shades of grey. Sea is mossy green and whorls of grey dot the skyline, like the cake's bacteria, which would be fit to kill a dog if I was to eat what I see, although they could be thought of as passionfruit seeds – I presume the whorls are storms, or squalls, or a distant flock of birds. I take it that I should avoid the dark bits, which is useless to think from a kayak at sea, wind at my back, land that won't have me, and a sky that moves. The benign breeze that usually blows a little stiffer in the afternoons is no longer playing out.

At 45 degrees to my right is a view of borderlands between South Africa and Mozambique – if I squint. I assume the official line of sovereignty is a triangular cardinal marker built on the highpoint of a reddish headland, but it might be a house, or a fused droplet of water on my sunglasses. There's no border marker on my charts, which are from the 1970s and fast becoming useless, destined to be toilet paper instead of navigation aids. I'm eight kilometres from shore, although it could be ten, or five. Distance and scale are gummed up and hard to fathom in moody conditions, and I dare not turn on my GPS because I've learnt my lesson. You come to rely on gadgets and digital numbers like grease on lips and milk on cereal, and I don't like the feeling when batteries die, as if you've lost part of your brain.

To distract myself, I return to my vision of the cake on the table. I imagine no one has come or gone from the house to disturb things in those 26 days. Sweaty funk emanates into the room, combining with the essence of four white terriers that live almost permanently in the house. The cake has sat there for four weekends and three working weeks, awaiting swearing and howls of disgust from the returned troop of sandcastle-building, trash-novel-reading, overeating family of seven.

I see Jack, the most lovable of the family, youngest of five, irresponsible because he's ten and has been allowed to be carefree. It's Jack who forgot the cake. Jack's dad, Henry, who people – including his kids – call Hen, is really to blame, having given Jack two jobs instead of one. Keeping the dogs happy while the car was being packed is where the boy's responsibilities should have stopped. It was a stupid idea for Jack to have to get the cake from the kitchen table when the dogs had been shut in the back of the car, as his eldest sister Kate knew all along. Hammering home the injustice, she had made the cake.

Jack remembered he'd forgotten the cake not far from home, only about 20 minutes into the six-hour drive to the coast, but thought best not to tell his mum, which to Jack was a sure sign of good decision-making. So, there the cake was, moulding away beautifully in a semi-controlled state, as if the new science teacher, overeager and wasteful by nature, had set up an experiment to impress the kids on day one of the school year.

Storytelling fills my thoughts to the beat of 50 unthinking strokes per minute because I have all the time in the world. It's unsurprising there's a mouldy funk to my thinking, as life at sea – particularly sea kayaking, where your backside sits below the waterline – is a life of moisture and festering. Even when your pruned hands get a chance to dry out in the evening, you're still damp, as are your tent, sleeping bag, spare clothes, your oats and your book. My own sweat, ambient humidity and constant variation of temperature cook and stew everything. Salt holds on to water like an infant holds on to a grub they've found on the lawn, and is equally greasy, applying a sheen of glistening slip to everything from toothpaste to eyelids. Water infuses you and your being, and will not leave until you leave the coast. Even your subconscious, sleeping self is watery, tuning in to last night's tide without being asked, knowing how far up the beach it got because your own outer layer of nerves and follicles never stop listening.

There is a beauty in the unexplainable passage of time when you're by yourself at sea because time seems to operate so differently. Humanity seems to drown after a while, streaks of aircraft and the odd boat becoming no different from birds or flotsam, coming in and out of your orbit without touching you, so

they disappear at the same rate they came into view.

On I plug, imagining abstract life inspired by whatever speaks to me from the chromatic layers of due south panorama. Taken over, I become a daydreaming animal. Leaking at regular intervals – which for the long-range trucker and the expeditionary sea kayaker is our cue to take our eyes of the horizon and focus on the teeth of a zipper – brings me back to reality. I aim badly into a crude, sharp-edged plastic sports bottle with the top third cut off. It's a dangerous activity given all the moving about, chancing a nick followed by an infinite supply of stinging salt. On rough days I question why I only brought one penis, having never thought to bring a spare. It could sit in a Tupperware container in the day hatch, all greased up, with the spare set of allen keys and fishing tackle. I've brought the worthless pee bottle from Australia, the kind you can pick up from any roadside in the world. It's here because it never leaves the kayak, stowed with another dozen essential items in the front hatch. It flew halfway across the world to be used constantly, multiple times a day, far more useful than the satellite phone that's only really useful when it's too late.

Tannin-rich wee gets emptied over the side. I remind myself to drink more, so often finding myself dehydrated in places of water. You forget to drink when you're always wet, or looking at a vast desert of liquid. I bob about for a few minutes, maybe five, sipping water, stringing things out for as long as possible. My rule of thumb is to start paddling again when the boat finally gives in to the business of waves, which is to be neatly and without fail parallel-parked at the mercy of waves. Being at sea without steerage or power, which is the kayaker's state whenever you pull your paddle from the water, is to be subject to the world's largest, endless, lines of infantry, pushed along by the forces of swell, chop and wind. Swell is the big stuff that rolls in from the deep, a Swiss-ball equivalent to the tennis-ball chop that skips across the surface, while wind is air trying to be somewhere else. Both swell and chop are bound for shore, naturally, but not always in the same direction since swell is driven by gigantic currents that are dictated by everything from week-ago storms to the spin of the earth, and chop comes namely from the day-to-day direction of wind. In this way, two forces, big and old, young and small, dictated by wind, pushing and dragging and roiling beneath you. When your paddle makes it back into the water and you get up enough speed to determine your own direction, you counter these forces with ruddering and edging in a particular way to head where you want to go, trying not to comply with the giant carpet beneath, which is nothing less than colossal forces moving in a particular direction by the laws of horizontal gravity.

I think, not for the first time, how strange it is that humans piss and drink an almost identical amount of fluid. Buying a lemony-orange-flavoured sports

drink, downing it, and leaking the same-coloured mix of electrolytes and minerals is a little bonkers, and amazing. But I like pondering these mammalian ins and outs because it's a non-sea-based thing to think about, and I'm lost for a few moments to thoughts of primates becoming upright, the production of sports drinks, and the remarkable expansion of human evolution that's taken place between those two events.

My paddle lies across the cockpit, sitting in the vee between my knees. A small wave flops from the side into the open cockpit, folding neatly into my lap and ending my break. I sponge out a few handfuls while swearing, which is part of the routine, then reseal my spray-skirt. I scan my sponge-cake world. No longer rustling along to the unheard sounds of paddling, or the relative focus of a fly and zipper, I start to feel what I'm seeing, breaking myself out of the autopilot bubble of slippery time and make-believe. Are conditions worse than an hour ago? I ask myself. No. Hmmm, I don't know. Yes, but not a lot.

Given it has taken some time for the day to get so smudgy, I'm surprised when things start to shift quickly. Not unlike a walk to the train station that cuts things a little too close, the walking air has morphed into a jogging breeze. Wind, which can be seen in its distinct speeds in how it interacts with the water, is all of a sudden in a hurry to be somewhere else, more decisive in the way it smears and licks.

I take up the paddle and continue south. Africa, to my right, remains indifferent to the pressure shift and the impact it will have on my situation at sea. Land life always seems firm and unchangeable compared to the fickle trends of a life aquatic. It's land where my jealousies and yearnings often reside, like the way I view birds so easily flying amid turbulent winds. Land masses don't think as a human does; it exists in all of its immensity as a self-contained universe. We humans do the thinking, making choices and stuffing things up. Like my decision to be at sea today, which I considered not doing as I packed my things this morning, watching the sea – always watching, pottering about, systematising.

In truth I'm getting into the habit of looking for excuses not to go to sea, but I'm running out of time on this trip and the reasons for not going are becoming harder to find as days run out. Near-misses come and go, so you harden up a little and learn as only fools and experts can. When I watched the sea this morning, clouds were built and fluffed up in the north-east, but so be it: today was a paddle day because the shore break wasn't all bad, meaning I could launch, meaning I could paddle. So, there it sits on the eastern horizon – a visible slice of continent, red, firm ground, yet for now an unreachable place. Reefed and rocked and protected from a landing for another 20 km, the giant landmass

remains a distant pariah. I must stay at sea, beyond reach.

In a matter of minutes, waves begin to crease and lump in strange ways. No longer does the moving world seem a predictable layer of lines and suggestions of movement. Clouds descend even more, as if great arms of the sky are embracing, gently squeezing the air around me. Something is happening.

I see power, as godly as I can fathom, when I look over my left shoulder in the direction of Madagascar. At 300 m away, closing in and steepening, bound for the continent, is an enormous rogue wave. Caught in the act of surviving, or dying, I am instantly, profoundly scared. The situation becomes staggeringly real. I explode into action, toeing hard on the left rudder and leaning aggressively forward as I slip my knees into the bracing. Fingers claw and yank on the grip as I stab the water. Everything buckles under the torque, bending and tensioning, madness against sea, as the wave's face continues to rise and froth. A hiss emanates from the horrid uprising.

'What the fuck?' I spit. 'A breaker, so far out?!'

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It took 27 years of life to lead me to that point of high adventure and extreme risk. Knowing that fear deep in my bones, I've tried ever since not to repeat it. Not fully perhaps, as I always seem to have a perverse attraction to chaos, and a toothache-like appetite for occasional misadventure. Sure, I don't like rotten teeth, but if I have one, I play with the spectrum of pain it provides because it tells me I have a galaxy of nerves in my mouth – a universe that was dormant until the rot set in. Misadventure is a toothache – to be avoided, but embraced if it comes along because there's no other choice. In short, I made it over the wave, just, before the full spectacle of terrifying force exploded beyond my stern. Twelve years later, here I sit twirling a pale-gold ring on my wedding finger, heart rate slightly raised at the thought of a wave that spoiled a perfectly good story.

It's said the ring represents a bond to a special nerve that goes all the way to the heart. It doesn't, of course, but it does say something of the socially constructed power of symbolism: that a small band around my finger will dictate where I go from this point on, and in fact will outweigh the experience of a wave that has altered where I now go in a sea kayak. When she handed me the ring during our wedding, Helen joked, 'This wedding ring is fitted with a GPS tracker so that I'll always know where you are.' She wasn't talking about infidelity, but instead my appetite for thick mountains and remote coastlines.

Let me be present for a moment. Reflection and reality are blurring the older I get, likely from all my time spent alone, which gets mighty confusing and a little

lonely after a while. Here I'm propped, typing, sitting in my small house at a pine, drop-side kitchen table, which could equally be called a living-room table, desk, dumping ground. My third cup of coffee for the day sits on a stained notepad by the open window. I'm not fussy about coffee; white-brown-warm is just fine. I drink it ritualistically, not fanatically. Birdsong crackles, and there's a wash of peripheral green light from a springtime five-acre block. On the property are four buildings I've mostly or fully built: big barn, small barn, small house, small cabin, each with unfinished business. Jobs are everywhere, including a wonky leg of this table; I cursed it just moments ago for spilling my coffee for the second time in as many minutes.

My immediate surrounds, the insides of the house, contain the stuff I've accumulated as much as the things I've not kept. Around me is a hand-picked world: wardrobe of woolly knits; kitchen full of sharp knives and copper pots; bookshelf of books that are mostly read; and walls of artworks that are inviting, evocative or simple enough to be anything. I spend money on things that should last and not a lot else. A friend told me once that the rooms in my home were masculine, which made sense at the time for a single white male who mostly slept, and not dwelled, in the house. When Helen started frequenting the farm a sympathetic touch started to creep in, hanging blinds, unpacking things a little, and generally making the place seem less angular or a retreat from the outside world of work and play. Looking out the window now reveals a cultivated, and in so many ways unnatural, world. Regardless of how practical I think of my existence is, just as the wave on day 62 of my Africa trip altered how and when I have departed land ever since, my small farm is filled with storied objects that are totems for how I live.

But as I sit and contemplate, sipping and stirring, it occurs to me that this is only half true. While I have worked over these five acres of West Gippsland, Gurnaikurnai country, a culmination of my 13,870 days on planet Earth, I have come to know that very little, if anything, of my surroundings – layered with 4.5 billion years of evolution – is unique to me. I am surrounded by copies and blueprints of animals coming and going, promoting, or cutting short, survival. People, of course, with their innovative minds and tools, at war or conspiring with the neighbours, have a lot to do with how and why I sit in this place. Outside are gigantic trees that regrow after an incinerating bushfire, and oak trees that are magnificent and grand and look as though they belong, but don't. Perhaps I'm the perfect candidate for white-man's folly, somewhere between gumtree and oak, born here but with the wrong kind of bark.

You see, I've recently started to question everything. In the process of writing a PhD about adventuring and filmmaking, which emerged into a Freudian

crosscheck of my ego, a certain form of antagonism arose, meaning I trust less, including myself. I started exploring new ways of thinking, questioning what to do, why, when to do it, and really, Beau, what's the bloody point to all this questioning? What a bore. Go back to doing something, anything, silencing the self-talk while digging, or cutting wood, or wielding a hand slasher as though you're a medieval warrior. Either way, do something intense enough to stop thinking about anything other than what you're doing.

Deep within thesis writing, wallowing in vats of coffee and a growing waistline, I was motionless for long enough to think about the life-affirming wonders of calloused hands and sore feet. Bleary-eyed, screenified, lumped in a chair, mostly static, I missed the outside world more than ever. Yet at the same time I knew that sedentary lockdown was a condition for such slow and steady thinking, giving me a place to ponder what I like most about being human.

In the wash-up of the PhD, 2018 was the first year of my adult life that I didn't leave my home continent, domesticating myself instead of crossing a large patch of water to be somewhere else. While on one hand there's been a palpable sense of arrival (married, financially stable, healthy enough, fit enough, happy enough) in this period of my life, there's still an overriding question of why and what's next. Not just the annoying midlife religion of being present, local, and loved up enough to have kids and grow vegetables – although these aspects of the good life are playing out as I write – but starting to emerge was my new understanding of both the insignificance and the great importance of my so-called adventures.

To think at a deeper level about my irritable state of play, being unsure of this thing I've come to call adventure, I make toast. As I stand eating at the sink, crumbs going everywhere, it occurs to me that, in a horrible stroke of symmetry, I've lived roughly the same number of days as adult and non-adult. This is a somewhat arbitrary statistic, other than to say the physical meat of me is no longer prime. Lamb is turning to mutton. I can no longer, for example, share a birthday with the winner of the Tour de France. My bell curve is on the way down, starting to mirror the ascent of the first 38 years. Indeed, it was after the last few years of teenage life, as I became adult Beau via a car, alcohol, and girls, that my independent outdoor life kickstarted my identity. Of course, you need some semblance of an identity to have an identity crisis, and it seems that the first years of being grown up laid good enough foundations to now pull apart.

Go away, young man

I stumbled into early adulthood with an overpowering sense of entitlement to be somewhere else, adventuring, fornicating, drinking, socialising. My instincts were to do things cheaply in backwaters, setting off with ad-hoc gear following a vague itinerary based on cheap flights and cheap places to sleep. I had with me an emerging skill set familiar to outdoor types; I knew how to peg down a tent in high winds, fix it when it ripped, and dig holes to crap into. The skill set was a default of living on a small farm with parents who were makers and doers: Dad the landscape artist–cum–truck driver, maker of things, and Mum the nurse, gardener, matron. Having been scolded all my life for being in the house during the day, the outdoors became my natural habitat.

Mum and Dad spent my childhood bent over a shovel, rotary hoe, or bale of hay, sweating their heads off. I've never seen people work so hard, sweat so much, before cooling off momentarily with a chunk of fruit in the shade and going back to work as if someone had a gun to their head. I have long recognised that my work ethic has been built on my willingness to take up a shovel like they did. My bastard freckled skin continues to give me away as a redhead born to outdoor parents in a country with a hole in the sky.

After high school, I took on a gap year as an outdoor education trainee, spending every second week helping to lead hiking and canoe camps. With a new set of wheels in the form of an old brown car and flush with an apprentice's wage, I moved into a share house with two PE teachers and a farmer. Having run out of rooms in the house, myself and great mate Marco painted out the garage workshop, laid down a chunk of carpet and bolted a padlock to the door. My desk was a card table, louvre windows let in air when opened or closed, water ran down the walls when it rained hard enough, which made me and my things musty, and asbestos lining meant I couldn't wrestle anyone in the fear of breaking through the walls. I never once used the lock. It was perfect.

I made pizzas on weeknights, helped my big sister Jade's boyfriend build houses, and pretended I was twenty on weekends when I hung out with Jade's friends. I lost my virginity in their midst, drank cheap port and crashed my car into a tree. I grew a novelty beard and took up reading, which surprised me as much as when I took up Scrabble a decade later. Within a few months of starting a double degree in outdoor recreation and education at Monash University, I knew I'd found my people.

As I transitioned from school to work and university life, I toyed with the idea of being an elite soldier. An accepted application lay in a drawer, but after

watching *Saving Private Ryan* I was saved, not unlike the fourth Ryan brother. I remember walking out of the cinema and being disturbed at the barbarism of men killing boys, the vivid, loud scenes strewn with body parts. While I was attracted to the idea of hard-nosed expeditions, eating scant provisions and never having to shower, killing others didn't interest me. More than that – it frightened me.

Although the film didn't inspire me vocationally, the exploits of Tom Hank's 2nd Ranger Battalion did move me creatively. Twenty years later I can still hear the squelch of mud under the soldiers' feet, sense the cruel coldness of having to hold a rifle gloveless when it snowed, and how a scene set in a yellow cornfield made me feel hot. I remember thinking how remarkable it is that sounds and vision can symbiotically inform the rest of my senses. I screwed up my military papers, borrowed a video camera, set off and pushed record every so often.

Lugging a camera about

My first attempt at filmmaking was walking the 1953 Everest expedition route, following the footsteps of the first official party to make the summit. The month-long walk took me from the outskirts of Kathmandu to Everest base camp. Inspired and shocked by Jon Krakauer's bestselling book *Into Thin Air*, I had written 'Everest by age 20' on the title page, scripting a date with the iconic mountain for my birthday. On my last day as a teenager, I watched the sun set over the famous mountain.

After the sun went down, I left my camera and went higher on Everest's flank, guided by moonlight as the temperature plummeted. Looking up at the iconic triangular summit was a life-changing moment. I had never before immersed myself in a place with such grand scale and terrifying beauty. The grinding echoes of the glacier, diluted by thin, cold air, were remarkable. Under yellow torchlight I stumbled back to my tent by the edge of the glacier. I awoke as a 20-year-old, riddled with altitude sickness. None of this subtext, or footage of these moments, was translated to the meagre 32 minutes of film I recorded. Lacking personality, reality, chronology and creativity, the footage didn't make it past my living room when I returned.

As much as I loved the idea of filmmaking, it was a pain in the arse. I had thought that pretty, wide, spectacular scenery and human action were the core of a travel story. This is true in part, but to capture the wide and spectacular, you need to run the tape over the incidental and everyday. My first obvious flaw was that I was allergic to the idea of stopping, always thinking that a better view or story was around the corner, which is also true enough, but a trap of poor filmmaking. When I did make time for shots, I didn't give them the energy or insight they deserved.

Embracing shot-making took time. To slow down ever so slightly, realising that a story needs purpose, and purpose is built on the everyday and ordinary, is harder than it sounds given there's so much of it. Shooting this way means that smaller tales build within the bigger picture, like muscle supported by bone.

It's taken years to figure this out, and I'm only just learning how to shoot the mundane, bad, routine and odd. One guiding credo rules my storytelling now: when you don't feel like shooting or writing, you need to shoot and write. Not that I was there yet. As a young twenty-something I was still nibbling at the edges of what it means to be a narrator, but surfacing was the idea that good storytelling is authenticity in the face of reality.

Camp

At about the same time I was entertaining the idea of being a filmmaker, I got horribly sidetracked by a cult. I was hungover on a beach one day in Thailand when a wayward frisbee hit my foot. I picked up the disk then scanned the direction of travel for the owner and found Jed, the son of a camp director in the U.S. Based on Jed's bad throw or a gust of wind, I spent ten summers at the alternative and exceptional Camp Sangamon in central Vermont, five hours north of New York City by train. Through largely positive human experiences in a seasonally intense identity-building time of life, a decade of northern hemisphere summers provided a counterpoint to Australia, the rest of the world, and my path within it. If I am now the sum of three parts: they are Mum, Dad and camp.

What it did was make fear of missing out disappear, which is a powerful measure of decision-making for any young adult. All manner of social, cultural, environmental and economic ramifications in life, even if only for three or four months each year, seemed to come from the same 100-acre property at the end of a lane on the other side of the world. Seasonal hothousing bred year-round simplification, which at its core is an expression of complexity. Take, for example, the use of an old pink towel that was left by a camper. When I first came across the towel, cleaning out cabins at the end of the summer, a small fray near the centre of the rectangle had me quickly, and without much thought, ripping it in half. A pet love of mine is old towels that are thin and almost worn out, and the pink was a salmon colour that made me think of the insides of smoked fish, so I took it on as my towel. It verged on being not quite enough to do the full job of drying me, leaving a leg or arms to air-dry, which for me felt like a perfect compromise. The other half of the towel was used as padding for two bars on the canoe trailer, oiled and non-oiled rags for cleaning travel stoves, and a scarf-sized section was nailed to a post next to the basketball court to wipe my brow during three-on-three. One towel, spread across camp in meaningful ways, was the kind of message we hoped to share with the boys, which by default taught us staff how to be multifaceted, getting on with things because tasks and emotions don't need a lot of ingredients if there's always something else to do, person to see, or place to be.

'Camp with the Pioneer Spirit' was a motto carried forward with no power in simple timber cabins, no mobile reception and no screens. Camp Sangamon was founded in the Depression to teach boys how to grow vegetables, care for animals and build community through games and hikes, and set on once cleared

land, now mostly forest, with a lake (the Pond, Burr Pond). For the modern camper it was like stepping back in time.

I introduced the place to my best mate Rowy and my sisters, who fell in the love with it too. I would run in the woods and dip in the pond most mornings, hike the local trails three days a week with the eight-to-14-year-old campers, and rouse about doing an assortment of everything and nothing in particular the rest of the time. I spent seven years with a great woman who was the head of horse-riding, a vet, learning how to ride and how to inject glorious-sounding drugs into flanks of animals with wonderfully large needles.

Meanwhile, the American landscape, which for me had been shaped by Hollywood, full of myth and imagination, made me appreciate that I wasn’t the centre of things, nor was my social and emotional life. It dawned on me that there’s no such thing as cleanly divided states of social, economic and environmental factors of our world. The fabric of the planet, I came to realise, is much like an old pink towel, made of a crude yet orderly state of dissonance taking form in every rock, carpet, grub, drug and shoelace. Everything is the environment.

When the newness of another continent started to become familiar, I slowly become interested in local history. Unlike in Australia, where I learnt to run and eat and talk, my born-again years in another continent marked my 2.0 learning phase. Schoolbook history in Australia was taught as white folks making tea among the ‘primitive blacks’, in a harsh backwater to the rest of the world. The U.S. seemed altogether more pissed off with the idea of a one-dimensional history, and was infinitely more fascinating because truth seemed to be questioned by a broader set of people with louder voices. As a young Australian who liked the idea of history but was too busy creating my own future, wrapped up in ego, it was nice to notice that I was starting to think backwards a little.

Every rock wall I'd pass in the staggering green mountains of Vermont was a wonderful reminder that a boom and bust agriculture movement had taken place. Such obvious equivalents in Australia are harder to see, so I would have to look elsewhere for clues about a place I thought I knew. I now know this change in mindset to be a typical experience when we live day to day in new places that make us question our homelands, which you might say unearths natural curiosities. A lot of folks call this perspective.

Adventure, the self-fulfilling con

Filmmaking finally won back my attention, enabled through a return to university, teaching into the course where I had previously been a student. Not that I made much in the way of films during my early time at Monash, but it meant I had a day job – teaching and guiding future outdoor educators – which meant sticking around. And sticking around meant fewer distractions, which for me meant a project or two could bubble away in the background and actually get finished. My job was to be an informal pathway to get young thinkers enrolled in post-graduate studies, although in truth I was hired because I was able to herd people at sea and carry an overburden of stuff on my back, which freed up the established minds for the important work of research and writing.

I learnt an awful lot tripping about with students from all corners of the world – several of the classes were made up of only exchange students. They saw Australia as a wonderland of awkward trees and funny-looking animals that wanted to kill them. It was excellent work because they, and my American affair, moved my sense of Australia from one of background noise – largely cockies and magpies – to a dreamland of eucalyptus, home to ancient cultures and a vastness that is staggering when you see it over the bow of a kayak or the shoulder of a bushwalking buddy. Such work led to a full-time contract, which led to a PhD, which led to being tenured, which was to be one part industrialised and one-part freedom thinker. It was the perfect place to make films.

In 2011 I was the first to run the 680-km Australian Alps Walking Track end to end (some people clock it at 650 km but the version I take is 680 km). The track, which is the oldest formal long-distance bushwalking track in Australia – saying nothing of the millennia-old walking lines that First Nations people have taken – had been attempted for a bunch of years by better runners than myself, burning away on the Australian ultra-running scene. I didn’t know this until I decided to run it, online searches revealing years’ worth of attempts. Friendly chatter of the ultra community was hedging bets on the next bunny rabbit.

I penned in a date, and signed up my brother-in-law Charlie Showers to be camp manager and pick-me-upper and cameraman Brett Campbell to film. Off we set across the mountains of Australia, bingeing on a stupendous number of calories to get the job done. My insights about food were profound, as I turned peanut butter and figs and whatever Charlie cooked into an all-day distance. I barely crapped and leaked a lot, even when I didn't need to because it meant I could stop, and came way too close to stepping on sticks that were in fact snakes. Thirteen days and ten hours later I rolled into Walhalla in Gippsland with a fat, overused left leg (the right was just fine), thinking about Oprah, which was odd, and a shower, which made sense. The film of the run was the first I'd been involved with that predominantly used footage from another person's eyes, which was a breakthrough as it revealed moments I would never have been able to capture myself. *Trials of Miles* made me realise that humans are – that I am – fallible, and this is an essential plotline to any adventure tale.

My PhD made a bumbling start in 2012, scripted loosely around the idea of investigating the essences of adventure, the phases of expeditionary life, and existential flag-raisings in place of mountaintops and new lands. Although I initially wanted to write and film a study of other expeditionary sea kayakers who cross and circumnavigate large chunks of water in much the same unnerving capacity that mountaineers scale high, steep and remote peaks, mid-candidature scrutiny made me turn the lens on myself. The issue, picked up by my panel of examiners, was that I didn't trust myself to inspect others when I was still so hung up on the so-what of my own life. Ethnography – a study of others – switched to autoethnography – a study of the self – and how I, ultimately, am a mirrorball of a thousand shining squares reflecting the world around me.

While I was still in the self-inspection hot seat, I cooked up a shared sea kayaking expedition: paddling from mainland Australia to Tasmania, hopping between islands of the famous Bass Strait. Fellow paddlers were a known and unknown quantity in the form of Matt, who I'd worked with at Monash, and Dan, whom I'd met in Hong Kong at a sea kayaking event. Putting the three of us into an intimate relationship for a up to a month was a risk I'd never taken before, especially given Matt and Dan didn't meet until several hours before departure.

Taking a punt on a long and stable weather window, we set off a week earlier than scheduled. By the first night I suspected our trio would do just fine. More than that, we were a wonderful mix of odd, direct, and zigzag. I've never enjoyed a sea kayaking expedition more, playing third wheel to a developing friendship, later describing Matt and Dan as a watch of exceptional quality (Matt) connected to a velcro wristband (Dan): this made for a mechanism that was functional, funny to look at, and told us when to leave.

At the same time another great friendship was emerging between ex-student Mitch Drummond, who was becoming my filmmaking companion, helping shoot the expedition as its ghostly fourth member. The three-week expedition went on to became a six-part YouTube series *Bass by Kayak*, which was poked and prodded into shape as the backbone to my doctoral thesis, titled *The Secret Life of the Sea Kayaker*.

Crossing Bass Strait, a series of island-hops, is a handsome metaphor for people teleporting into another world. Much like the way that great ascents or descents on land and rivers stretch out people to become new versions of themselves, losing sight of land before a new slice emerges from the horizon makes you evaluate why going places, particularly new places, is so powerful. Yet new lines of travel that I make, often in search of a new me, is one of the great and likable cons of adventure. These lines – the course of a river, a bearing at sea or a deep crack up the steepest face of a cliff – have existed in their own way, and to others, for millennia. Whether we actually follow those same lines or not is another matter, but they were known about, and if they weren't it's likely because the line is arbitrary, and that a more common, easier, less adventurous way exists. Everest, for example, was not climbed by the locals because the summit didn't offer anything of substance other than a place of spiritual reverence and a perfectly good seasonal pass was available for passage around its flanks. The summit of Everest, as with all adventure, is about invisible meanings we conjure, then pursue with single-minded desire, often with a reduced regard for our own life, which to many is because they want to live.

Bass by Kayak was not all that adventurous, not really, because we took our

time. It was merely a specific set of skills being played out in a specific place by lucky white blokes with fancy phones and expensive kayaks. We were attached to an umbilical cord of satellites and long-range weather forecasting the entire time, as well as pulsating spot beacons, and were loaded up with half a dozen forms of mayday comms if things went further south that we intended. Meanwhile, HD cameras the size of our eyeballs recorded the fifteen-day expedition, as well as the six months that had led up to the first paddle stroke, at a rate of 24–100 frames per second.

The result was a visual diary of mostly good choices and fleeting dumbarsery in blue sea and wide sky, uploaded to YouTube. Yet the making of that film still entailed a process of tripping over myself, presenting to the world via pictures and metaphors and Beauisms my bent form of reality. It felt close to authentic, but not quite.

Nut job

Back at the kitchen table I shift in my seat, flexing my lower back and bum to redirect what seems to be dim-witted blood with no inspiration whatsoever to discover hard to reach places. Still, it feels good sitting here because it's an ideal place to dwell and write, drinking tea and coffee all day. Glancing out the window, I daydream about running.

'Mate, you're a nut job,' I heard conversationally, not loudly, from the close-by window of a slow-moving car, said as if I were riding shotgun in the car itself. What an insightful thing to say, fella, I thought, you dick. Oblivious to how my choice of unlikely places to run gets judged by others, I've tended to own my billowing-hat, odd-socked ways for a good while now, and I don't realise things are off kilter unless I stray too close to the highway or run through town. That is, I'm oblivious until I'm called on it by a concreter travelling between jobs in stinking high-vis, window down, about to light up.

A few kilometres later, the highway traffic slowed again to walking pace due to another batch of roadworks. I passed nut-job man at a steady 14 km an hour and said conversationally, 'Good luck with the traffic, fella. Nice ute.' Which meant nothing, other than to say I was chuffed that my ancient form of transport was doing a better job of getting somewhere than his was.

Coming through the front gates after yesterday's run was an arrival home in more ways than one. It was a longish run – being Sunday, my sabbath for going a little further – hitting up country roads made of dirt, which are rare in my parts now, so I end up joining them together with chunks of highway. It seems something about my interaction with high-vis dick set me off thinking about the oddities of humanity, as well as thoughts of making things, breaking things, road signs, roadkill, bad underpants and what I'd eat, in what order, when I walked in the door. Individual things that are ordinary in their own right seemed extraordinary as a collection. Long run, billowing hat, variations of temperature, crossing the road every other minute to get maximum shade, perhaps like so many runs before it, was a portal to an immensely interesting world. Other than the depreciated cost of a pair of running shoes, and the scant dollars spent on second-hand shirts and lost-and-found shorts, my experience was almost free, easy and forever accessible in some form or another.

In the final furlong to home, mashed up in a cross-section of what I saw were ruminations on my so-called adventurous life, which is really an ongoing debate about my sense of perception. Back on the deck at home, half nude as I acclimatised from the heat and movement of running for three hours, I slowly ate

chickpeas from the tin, which is a rare speed of eating for me. I'm thinking with scepticism about being an Adventurer; engaging in daring and risky activities, in unfamiliar places, often with only a hint of the expertise required to be there. Much like my wariness of real estate agents, I've seemed to gloss over the truth with half-truths, pitching stories as audacious, unable to see that so many other people do things tougher, riskier, more challenging and perhaps ever more rewarding in far less publicised ways. There is truth to the idea that I like seeing what lurks in hard-to-reach places, and I might be plucky and enterprising, which fits the bill of adventure, but brave and heroic should never be keywords of my films, in my bio, or anything else associated to me. More than that, these bold terms of adventure should be questioned. I say this because at various stages I've unwittingly bought into that mindset, and looked at maps and charts as if I were a conqueror, out to beat the world.

Day three without showering, in need of haircut and shave, about to leave the house to buy milk, I was in fact on the comfortable side of an identity crisis, having come to terms with the fact that I was not the man I thought I was. Such a breakthrough in thinking is to acknowledge that I have a uniqueness born of influences, which seems a little more scripted than innate, including summer camps and university, stinking male-only share houses, roadside diners, expeditions, films, women, family. I am flawed, and oscillate between being mildly and intensely curious about our world, and that makes me and my newish, ongoing, close-to-home trips interesting.

Rather than loading up with expensive gadgets and upskilling to the point of perfection, I'm setting off in the full knowledge that I'm weighed down with metaphorical baggage so my aim now is to take as little real equipment as possible. Where I go and where I might end up are a little shady, and research from the bottomless pit of Google is often lacking.

Before I begin, let me be clear, as my great flaw is impatience: this is not a guidebook for the good life, nor will I preach about the importance of challenge and epiphanies, hardship and breakthroughs. Backyard adventuring is about concocting meaningful events and experiments that challenge me, that redefine my childhood sense of the hero's journey, that force me to look intimately in everyday places, and question how I live among others. Ultimately, it's about being pissed off enough to take care of myself, others and non-human life, and happy enough not to let myself, others and non-human things bother me all the time. Balance between firing myself up and wetting myself down is the great act of perception I'm taking on. Quite simply, this book is a set of stories told by a red-headed bloke who has redefined his sense of adventure.

CHAPTER 1:
WALK

Awaysick

When you find yourself bored of cashews, your pen is running low on ink, and the book you've read three times is starting to wear thin, you're likely in the midst of a long expedition in a place where the nuts are cheap. For me, this was Africa, when I paddled from Inhambane in Mozambique to Cape Town, South Africa. I've done other trips where the cashews were beer, the book is myself, and the expedition has no set destination and no boundaries other than the outline of a continent.

Each adventure is the prescription drug of the vagabond – a wayfaring, beachcombing type who drifts. Sometimes there's a clear objective, but it's often unclear what the objective means, or where it will get you beyond a longitude–latitude bearing of a dreamed-up starting point. Home-life shackles of habits and routine are shed in exchange for being on the move in a place you've likely never been before and likely won't see again.

Then a chunk of dumbarse porridge gets caught in your beard and all of a sudden, the very act of adventuring and expeditioning becomes as routine as home life. A fork in the road, or a rough landing on an unnamed beach in a foreign county, becomes no more or less engaging than having your shoelaces tied by 06:45 in order to make the 06:52 express, putting you at your desk by 08:05 in time to drink your third cup of coffee by 08:30. You dramatise the hum-drum routine of making a particular train, to the point where it takes over your imaginations and desires, much like the tantalising prospect of paddling yourself to a coastline of coconut palms and few people had inspired you years earlier.

Occupying a sliver of sand above the high-tide mark or a patch of semi-even forest floor in the mountains, with a night-time view of mosquito blotches inside the tent fly, can become as familiar as your porch at home where, while sipping a morning cup of tea, you notice paint flaking on the eaves. Familiarity sweeps through. I do like the fact that the exotic becomes common, but after so many hundreds of hours of middle-distance landscape or seascape always moving, bookended with a similar routine of setting up and packing down, new places have lost their sparkle. On a certain day with a long beard I lost my 20/20 vision

of adventure, made obvious with poor hand to mouth coordination when porridge missed the hole in my face and occupied my beard instead. Such a moment is really just waking up without an invisible set of goggles on that tint the world. Adventure has not changed, but something in you has.

I pilfer salty, almost untouched first-aid supplies and barter with the locals for a mirror. The reflection is not of a zinc-smudged, porridge-bearded man with a cracked lip, but instead a cleanly shaved face with diluted freckles, framed by the clean collar of a shirt.

Of course, I don't see this reflection – mirrors have no place on expedition – nor did I barter for a mirror with first-aid supplies because I had long ago traded first-aid supplies for drinking water. In Africa, my reflection was one I felt. Actually, I smelled it, three months into the expedition. Unmistakably, 8 km offshore, a strong westerly brought me the smell of eucalypts from a plantation forest of thick and healthy trees growing in the same latitude and similar dirt to Australia. The scent brought a genuine bolt of sentimentality. For the first time in my life I felt homesick. Deeply. More so, crystal clear, I felt the sickness of being away. And there's a difference; homesick is longing for home, while awaysick is a longing to be anywhere but the place you're in. While a week of camping in the African gums might have cured me, I didn't dare because such an act would delay the obsession of me and my kayak heading south which, after a while, is the only thing to do; you want to be anywhere else but the place you find yourself.

Seven weeks later, when my Kiwi mate Jarred Sharples had re-joined the expedition, the harbour master in Cape Town wanted to impound us when we paddled into town via the industrial wharf. Weaving between freighters the size of city blocks, horns blew and sirens rang. 'Fair enough, mate,' I said to him on the radio. 'Take me in. I'm done.'

As with five months in Africa, running for two weeks across mountains in Australia, or a decade of seasonal work on the other side of the globe, I return home and sit long and still in my favourite spot drinking tea, thinking about what just took place. Then I shower, which I've long thought to be a place of shedding. In the familiar 900 × 900 mm capsule, looking at the same cracked tile, I'm amazed that the last 14 days or five months took place, as if it were some kind of hypnotic, drugged-up, ridiculously long day. You watch as your experience goes down the plug.

Regular work resumes and you look at that cracked tile without seeing it. Familiarity and ease take over, as do your old frustrations, which never left home, or you, but are somehow different now. Brushing your teeth at a similar time and heading to the level three toilet at work – where you can leave the stall

door open and look through the mid-canopy limbs of gum trees – replaces weeks of no toothpaste and a different, edgy place to squat every day.

Your shadow returns one morning when the 6:52 express is cancelled and they replace the rail service with buses, in peak hour. You suddenly yearn to have made the godly gesture of stopping the train yourself, not having relied on a big city to do it for you.

Emerging allergy to moving parts

Train cancellations can be biblical experiences. When I wander away from the platform that morning, miffed at the uselessness of being annoyed, I can't help but think there's a better way to get to work, which is to say a better way of being human. I curse myself for not listening more intently when a large and systematic process had irked me, somewhat irrationally, for changing so swiftly the shape of my day. I ask the people in fluoro vests for information about the cancellation, and they tell me, like last time, that they're not sure. I detest not knowing, not because I need to know everything, but because I feel as though it's a simple question to answer. Buses roll in, stinking up the place. People are generally patient, incredibly, and I'll admit that I see more humanity in train cancellation events than any other kind of social phenomena.

I find myself wanting to run away, literally, from the crowds and the limp procedures that stumble into action. To back my own body to fix the situation – on foot, by bike, kayak, rollerblades, powered by a hand of bananas and thick loaf of bread. Jumping in the car doesn't get much of a thought, as I know that roadblocks, highway patrol, traffic lights, and honking others are just as unpleasant as taking the bus in the company of 100 armpits.

Around the time of this train cancellation, living a few days a week with my then-girlfriend Helen in the suburbs of Melbourne, and about eight years after my African paddle, I had started getting antsy about my reliance on big-city ways of thinking. That is, the tenuous nature of being part of a multi-faceted machine that was all kinds of brilliant when it worked, which was most of the time, but horrendously complex and hopelessly unfixable when it didn't.

I was becoming uncomfortable with the number of strings attached to the routines of my everyday. Making this funk fester even more was the fact I was locked into self-questioning while writing my PhD, which involves hacking into the bedrock of your worldview. Every researcher should do this — chew over their own needs, wants and prejudices — because there's no such thing as taking on a task objectively. Doing so is an act of spreading yourself thinly, as if trying to see some kind of self-transparency, dialling in on why it is the thing you're inquiring into has merit, which is vital, because understanding your own framework means you might be able to translate this human interest in the form of results, outcomes and implications to others.

Becoming thinner during the process of self-questioning is of course metaphorical, because in reality I was getting considerably fatter with all the sitting, thinking, writing, not-doing. That morning at the station was one in a

season of train cancellations that tipped me over the edge because it meant more sitting around waiting for someone else to do the moving for me.

Hocus, pocus, adventure

Paddling around the southern coast of Africa and running the Australian Alps are examples of a young man with an ego no longer in search of gold, or new land, but himself. Risk versus competence has come to be known as the paradigm of adventure. A sense of adventure, peak adventure, or misadventure – scaling up intensity and required skill, and therefore risk – are *felt*. Death is the limit of misadventure.

In my case, like so many adventurous types before me, off I went pitting risk and competence against one another, sometimes scared, mostly engaged and every so often wanting a shark or a snake to come along and break the monotony. The more competent I became in whatever it is I was doing, the more so-called risks I'd take in order to feel challenged, rewarded and satisfied. Within all this is what's commonly called real versus perceived risk; an example of real risk is Alex Honnold's free solo climb up the face of El Capitan in Yosemite, while perceived risk would be climbing the same route attached to a system of ropes and anchors. One version means certain death when you fall and the other is a wedgie.

Yet both real and perceived risk are still up for debate because as any rock climber knows, you climb differently when you're not attached to rope. Skin is not just skin when climbing, it is an acute end-point of your body. When the climber is at the base of the rock deciding whether or not to go solo, it is here, at ground level, where real and perceived is a wonderful place to dwell.

I'm learning to take notice of this power of perception, and I've come to the realisation that I can do more in less space, intensely, with fewer tools. Stripping back versions of my day-to-day needs and wants has me whispering tall tales to myself in order to retrain my adventurous vocabulary. As socially adapted liars, humans oscillate on a broad scale of how and when we lie, so it makes sense to do ourselves a favour. Convincing my ego that homespun adventures can be challenging, insightful, dirty, intense, intimate and all-consuming might be the most courageous thing I've ever done. Although in reading back over this last sentence in my head, I've yet again wrapped myself in a contradiction because backyard adventures are in fact all of those things, but I'm so used to thinking they're not so it seems I have to convince myself that the truth is in fact real.

The lovely idea of getting from Aye to Bee

I’m a liquorice man, all the way. Like the Spanish, I’d go to war for the stuff. Chocolate, as a comparison, knowing full well its silky adictability, has no hold on me whatsoever. That is, I like chocolate well enough, but I crave liquorice. I’m not entirely sure why this is the case because not everyone in my family likes liquorice, which is the obvious place to look for the architects of my tastebuds. The way I figure it, while liquorice-loving can be culturally ingrained by mums and dads and an out-of-reach bowl above the fridge, it’s impossibly confusing that a particular eating vice hits me and misses my sister, both of us shot with the same shotgun on the same range. Social and cultural construction is just one explanation, and it’s a flawed one, so rather than wallow in its contradictions I give in to the beauty of its mystery. Headfirst, boots and all, eating the whole damn bag, I like liquorice because my internal voice keeps telling me I like it.

Combining my great love of liquorice, and my great frustration at being late to work at the hands of so many moving parts, I wonder, thinking shortly and shallow, skimming for the most relevant ingredients of adventure, if a long walk to work can be a great conjuring, as if it were a wide sea to cross or a high mountain to scale? Salivating at the thought of a 90-km strip of road being an unworldly strap of molasses, walking to work has become a seemingly adventurous, practical and timely thing to do.

Walking 90 km to work, on purpose

I take a leak from the deck, as I do each morning. I'm relatively awake, at least compared to my night-time efforts, where autopilot rolls out a vaguely lucid routine in which I take particular aim from a particular spot. Both night-time and daytime leaks require me to rest my toes over the edge of the deck from a board that's slightly raised with the bulge of a knot. Every so often, especially after a boozy night, I go for broke and leak into the citrus pots, usually encountering spray-back. When dogs come to visit, they're particularly wary at the front of the house, which, elementally, is as much pheromones as it is timber. They're right to be wary, too: the deck represents bipedal territory, a threshold to the human's home, a distinct and pungent in-between space where green grass grows. A place of coming and going, departure and arrival. For a dog, it's a place of consequence, as it is for me. I'm about to leave the marked territory and walk 90.4 km to work.

My walking commute will mimic my regular drive from the farm, where Helen lives now – when she's not staying in town at the apartment – breaking from farmlands and through the fringe of Melbourne, destined for a giant university the size of a suburb. First, I will eat two breakfasts, poorly rub my exposed skin with a thick smearing of sunscreen, then drink a jug of water and a

plunger of strong coffee.

Rules for my commute are imperative, albeit arbitrary, tentatively scripting how the experience will unfold. An able-bodied, fit bloke who's made the slightly odd decision to walk to work is kind of ordinary, so I must believe that the walk holds potential, for me the walker, and, if I intend to tell my story, for you the audience. In order to be engaged, I must feel a sense of challenge. For me this means stripping things back, which breeds curiosity and accountability through forced tangents of decision-making, so that my story – passed on through words, images and film – might be told with a sense of artfulness, authenticity and insight. Naturally, I'll take care of myself during the walk itself, which is hard to unlearn, much like holding back your arms when falling, and I'll keep an eye on the time without timekeeping getting in the way of curious tangents. While I can't alter the course of my walking commute all that much, my freedom lies in the immediacy and simplicity of the task, and the internal conversation I'll have with myself and others as I mirror myself against the road.

Leaving with the clothes on my back, hat, shoes and nothing else, I will find and make my own shelter and source all water and food, either found or purchased using money I find. Of course, my inventory, or lack of one, has layers and choices attached to it. The pants are my favourite: ones that bend well at the knees, and they're soft with a stack of loose pockets to store roadside loot. I'm also wearing a tight, seventies-style long-sleeved woollen shirt that has a zipper all the way to my navel, which is great for climate control and the off chance I'll visit a disco, and a big, heavy woollen jacket called Bluey, with deep pockets, big buttons and fat collar that makes me feel like I'm bracing against the brutal winds of the Arctic. On my head will rest an oilskin hat I found on the side of the road in Alaska. My most treasured, important garments are hats, as they keep the sun off my ginger head in a country that bakes under a fierce bombing of UV. My chinstrap, tied through opposing airholes in the sidewalls of the hat, is a lace from my first hiking boots. When the strap slides up and lodges under my nose, I'm convinced I'm smelling my feet from 20 years ago. It's a hot and heavy hat choice, but it doesn't suffer from a droopy brim when it rains, and it stays fast when a wind, or a truck, passes by.

What I wear, which is the only kind of equipment I'll have with me, says as much about my walk as the things I will not take. Left behind is a micro-tent, goose-down sleeping bag, sachets of dehydrated super-calorific food, water bottles, undies, socks, sunnies, sunscreen, eating utensils, headtorch, knife, first-aid kit, coffee-brewing kit, liquorice of various types and toilet paper. I'll take a whiteboard marker to deliver my lecture, and small cameras as imaginary friends to talk to along the way. Mitch and Brett Campbell, trusty filmmaking allies, will

film me as I go, meeting up with me from time to time at road junctions where I will talk to camera about the walk to that point.

I'm not really one for taking breaks, or stopping, but when I do, it'll be for a reason. I expect to pull up stumps somewhere near a petrol station on day one at about the 50-km mark, which is also the only place on the mega-highway to buy food. The second day will be a mountaineer start, which is early enough to count as the day before, in order to make the 1 pm lecture. I suspect I'll encounter high-vis people with a fluoro sense of authority and safety, which I'll counter by also wearing high-vis, or at least plan to, as there always tend to be vests and flags littering roadsides that have been blown from the back of cars and trucks driven by people who don't know, or don't care to know, how to tie things down.

Stats

My 90.4-km ute commute from farm to the blue parking zone at the university regularly takes about 70 minutes. Add on a few minutes to each day if the annoying driver of the silver hatchback parks in the shady spot I covet and I have to find another. Given I work from home two days a week, my usual weekly commute time boils down to about seven hours, or 420 minutes, to cover the 542.4 km each week. With one night by the roadside to pretend-sleep, I'd allowed 30 hours to walk to work.

Rolling along at 95 km per hour, my old ute gets about 550 km per 68-litre tank, which on average uses 11 litres of petrol one way, costing about 16 dollars and delivering roughly 25 kg of Co2 into the atmosphere. While driving I typically have a cup of tea with a big splash of milk (no sugar), which is about 40 calories, then sit, change gears and listen to the radio, burning about a calorie a minute. By the time I open the door of my office, wash my cup and unload my running gear to air, I'm calorie deficient for my morning's work. The ute, of course, getting mighty hot under the hood, is different, having burned through a bucket full of ancient, refined forest. As the energy value of 11 litres of petrol is about 87,000 calories, I would have to run 1450 km, or 16 commutes, to burn the same amount of energy, which would need fuelling from 483 spotty bananas (which would weigh about 100 kg, about the maximum my wheelbarrow could tolerate, which would slow me down considerably).

My walking route is a hybrid of the route I would usually drive to work followed by, after a certain point, the route a driver in 1985 would have taken to the same spot. The first 75 km is down a country road then I turn right onto a multi-lane highway that leads to Melbourne. For the final part of the journey, I turn left onto the old highway, which was the edge of Melbourne when I was a kid and is now a place so thoroughly suburban I have a hard time imagining what it was like as farms, an old airport, paddocks lined with trees and the smell of cowshit when the window was down. The old highway, now completely dissected with traffic lights, industrial districts and service roads to gigantic estates leads me 15.4 km directly to the front gates of Monash.

Amazingly, I only make those two turns for the entire journey. New highways are what rivers once were, the most obvious and flattest place for humans to travel, yet without all the kinks. Undisturbed by geography as they go through and under, rarely around, with such a premium on vehicle lanes, based on all that colossal engineering, the new highway is also illegal for bipeds to travel under their own steam. Taking the old and direct highway, dotted with signs and lights

and Seven Elevens is not my first choice, but I don't fancy getting arrested, at least not for walking, which to me seems like getting arrested for inhaling too much air.

Given all the consistent and bendless speed that roads promote, I guesstimate walking 9 per cent more distance than if I drove my ute. I'm saying nine instead of ten given I'm making it up and ten sounds too perfect, and nothing – even meat-and-potatoes walking – is ever that neat. I'll spend 2900 per cent more time walking as opposed to driving to work. Life afoot is to enact the privilege of the wayfarer, distracted because we can afford to be by smells and sights and sounds that take us slightly, always, off course.

A car travelling at 100 km an hour, for example, takes a remarkably direct line, given inhuman speed doesn't allow drivers to deviate to avoid a cardboard box or a dead cat. When you're an accessory to roadkill as a driver – clipping the fur of a wombat, or dismembering a kangaroo – you barely move the steering wheel. By comparison, when I'm on foot I make detours when I find myself atop half a fox or the entrails of a sheep. I often stop, hand mashed over my face, shuffling around the remnants of life to satisfy an unwanted curiosity at witnessing how good humans are at killing. I also get gripped by gold fever, obsessively chasing after glint from bottle tops in the hope that them will be the one- or two-dollar coins of the Australian currency; money-hunting on this walk is much like looking for old house sites with remnants of an orchard (it's citrus season), which I'll also do.

For the walk I wear a watch with three arms and 12 numbers, ticking along to energy kinetically sapped from my moving body, which I love the thought of, and I'm leaving the phone at home, which means I won't have a satellite mapping my distance or route.

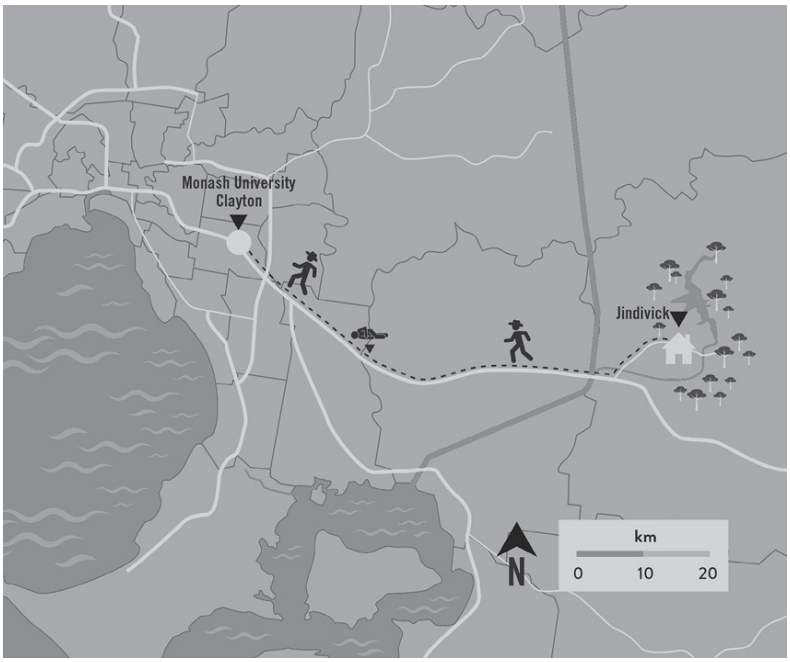
Knowing that my stride on flat ground, walking with a medium level of motivation – meaning I've got somewhere to go, but I'm not running late – averages out at 85 cm per step, I calculate I will take 117,640 steps, give or take a few. Of course, this is another Beau-stat, but it's likely pretty close, and does say two things. First, my step/pace gains a staggeringly consistent chunk of forwardness: my 117,000-odd steps are sending me 100,000 metres forward. Secondly, much like the meddling numbers of GPS tracking, I trust my internal, silent, unthinking counting more than I do a wrist-mounted electronic device with a dicky algorithm.

I once wore a pedometer during a lacklustre workday and clocked up 11,200 steps doing very little: leak from deck (12 m); make breakfast (50 m); check the rain gauge (100 m); put on pants (8 m); walk to car (50 m), then to office (300 m); take two dozen trips to the tearoom, photocopier and bathroom (let's say

1000 m), back to car (300 m); supermarket for bananas (150 m); check rain gauge, then letterbox (250 m); make dinner (25 m); pace about the place, wishing I'd gone for a run (100 m); brush teeth (8 m); leak from deck (12 m). This comes in at 2365 m, which at a mildly motivated pace of 85 cm per stride should have me at 2782.4 paces. My final tally of 11,200 steps must have counted all that bouncing on a Swiss ball and driving on a road with potholes in a ute that needs new springs.

The distance of the 'foot', needless to say, is a good reminder of how humans have travelled over time. I think a lot about paces and steps and the length of my stride because I'm a runner who counts without thinking, much like I hum to some songs and not others. Halfway up a hill in the deep bush of Australia, my great mate Ponch instructed me and my fellow outdoor education students to count our steps as we walked, humming to the cadence of our legs while paying attention to where we were, marking off terrain. It was doublethink, counting while trying not to count, which of course meant counting. We did this over the course of a few days, and once we referenced our figures against known quantities of landscape (elevation loss and gain, type of terrain, type of trail, distance), we started to understand what our bodies were doing through numbers.

I was taught the invaluable lesson of gauging how my particular set of legs travelled across various surfaces of the Earth, over time. I have repeated this metronome way of thinking with my students for years. The guide must know where they are in the world at all times. No vagaries should enter your navigational world when you're charged with the care of others. You might not always know where you are, but you must never be lost. Like so many tacit forms of knowledge, acute and embodied navigation is felt, such as knowing how many paces you take in a minute, then an hour. At first you use a watch to learn this, and then you eventually know how far you've come based on the position of the sun, if chafe has set in on a particular spot, or if you feel like eating a banana or not. By knowing your pace and shifting your pace-scale over different terrains, you can gauge with eerie accuracy how far your legs take you across the shifting shadows of the day.


Monash University
Clayton
Jindivick
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km
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10
20

Leave, dammit

Striding out across the lawn is genuinely exciting. I'm full, as I always am at the start, maxed out on energy, time and optimism, belly at capacity. If you time it right and the coffee is strong enough, only the bladder and bowel are empty.

As with my arms when I'm paddling, I forget about the key drivers of the initiative, my legs, by the time I pass two concrete pillars either side of my driveway. We tend to be guided by our eyes when our body does something ordinary like walking. I don't think about my legs enough, and how lucky I am to have a strong pair that take me wherever I care to go. Just like the two pillars beneath me, I haven't given the gate posts a lot of thought either, not since I stood the heavy buggers upright years ago.

It's unusual to pass through the great chunks of concrete while on a walk, and not while in the driver's seat of a car, aboard a tractor, or running. Even when I'm 15 metres up the road, I still find myself thinking about the posts; I'm slow to leave the property and my thinking is like slowly pulling a bandaid, intensifying and lengthening what is usually so quick. I purchased the farmer-made concrete posts at a clearing sale a few years ago for a dollar each, busting my gut to get them into my trailer. One-foot thick, six-feet tall, with gently sloping pyramids on each top, they are pretty pompous. I thought this when I passed them just now, tapping one on the way through as walkers do, signing off.

Another slowism creeps in 50 metres past the gates, when I notice a collection of beer cans scattered within a two-metre radius of a road marker. I pause for a moment to scrutinise the crime scene, picturing a bastard on his way home from work tossing his empties out the window. I say 'he' because I've never thought of litterers as women. I just can't fathom the thought that a woman would throw stuff from a moving car, which irks me, because it goes against the grain of feminism – that is, that women can be as good and as bad as men. Try as I might to believe that men and women are capable of sameness, I struggle to think that any sane female would ever create and drop an atomic bomb. Such violence seems to go against every womanly instinct I've ever witnessed.

Concrete posts and bad people occupy my thoughts for the next few minutes, which is okay, but it does occur to me that it's too early to be pessimistic, which is not my nature normally, especially not in the mornings. My legs, meanwhile, forgotten again, haul the rest of me towards the tiny hamlet of Jindivick, over the hill and up the rise. Front posts to Jindivick is 2.2 km. Jindivick to work is 88.2 km.

Making smooth strides on an unnaturally flat and linear surface, I travel at an average of 5 km an hour. I'm experiencing what Rebecca Solnit so wonderfully described, where 'mind and feet operate at the same pace', rhythmically, going somewhere. I silently narrate my one-act play, not realising I've slipped from an outside world to an inside one until a car honks.

I feel immediately the effect of my slower pace. Rarely do I walk on the roads I drive, so I notice the cracked edges of road several kilometres from my house, deep into dairy country, these cracks the result of milk trucks grinding up the road 10 to 15 times faster than I'm travelling. Never have I looked so closely at the glacier-like qualities of bitumen as it whittles away from the edges. As I've run every road within 20 km of home, many times, humping along at two or three times faster than a walk, my underfoot knowledge of the world is slightly out of focus. A runner looks ahead in their mid-sight blur, and a driver off into the distance, but a walker looks everywhere from a long strip of road, able to focus on any length of world for any length of time. I think of this sight/focus vs insight/knowledge scale while I walk, and it makes sense to me why babies crawl first, as they're able to take in the surface of the world intimately, looking at and tasting everything within range of their stumpy little arms. The older we get, the longer our limbs grow, meaning our faster forms of transport bring the eyes up to see wider and higher. We don't see more – far from it – we just see differently.

Taking in 16 km of country roads I've known my whole life, my first right turn brings me into an industrialised version of roadway I have no affinity with. Three times larger and ten times wider than the type of road I've spent the majority of my life driving or running, it's little wonder modern roads suffer a tragedy of the commons, owned by everyone and no one, where unknowns mow the grass on cleverly articulating machines with flashing lights, which as far as I can gather is the extent of rubbish removal, blending it into a thousand bits. Hi-vis-vest people, good people who work in extreme heat and the deluge of rain, fill potholes at all hours of the day and road signs are so frequent we only read every third. Of course, I hear all of this highway action for thirty-odd minutes before seeing it, a breeze on my right cheek bringing with it the sound of rubber coming into contact with a hard surface, blended with engine sounds, coming and going from left to right, right to left.

I join the massive road on a long and subtle onramp made for gathering up speed, although unlike the traffic that must merge intravenously at the same pace as those travelling at the speed limit, my cadence was determined in utero, when my femur length was set. My maximum speed, which is also my minimum on a walk such as this, was reached three hours ago when my time my right foot first

passed my left.

Not long on the main thoroughfare, the road that laps Australia as the Prince's Highway – named after The Duke of Edinburgh – I become a little nervous about all the noise, realising that this is the new norm for the next 24 hours, I stride off into a paddock, south, meaning into the gentle breeze, downwind of the noise. It's a glorious reprieve, sheltered by a row of cypress, watched by two goats who take a break from scratching each other with their horns.

When I cross my first bridge, the insulated safety of a wide, tapered and grassed roadside, instantly vanishes. Walking three feet away from high-speed traffic feels dangerous to the point that I consider balance-beaming the railing instead – death by plunge seems less likely than being smashed from behind. The other great risk is a presence from above. Not my mistrust of any kind of god but a complete faith in the strength of the sun. A world without canopy, open and unfiltered gets at me in slices, small areas uncovered by broad clothing and the shaded brim of my hat – hands, tip of my nose, slivers of neck. The modern road is stripped of vegetation on each side, ready to take another swathe of lanes. There's also very little food on offer. I had presumed from my thousands of kilometres of running that I'd simply stumble upon half-eaten takeaway and bruised bananas, but I find almost nothing. It also proves fruitless when I head any great distance away from the roadside.

Stark, often-treeless paddocks stretch either side of me in countless boxes fenced by barbed wire, offering only grass and weeds. Sure, fat animals of every kind look at me stupidly, sweetly or nervously when I amble past to steal some of their water, but butchering them on my way to work was not part of my plan. Instead, to gain any kind of calories from the landscape in which I walk, I go to the only bankable denomination of highway detritus that offers carbohydtaes, in the form of tossed out, half drunk, cola drinks. Containing their final moments of fizz, which to me means some anti-bacterial potion is still working, a whole bunch of people with a bad habit provide my principal form of energy and hydration. Having weighed up the likelihood of drinking down hepatitis C, I've long hedged my bets on the carbonic acid in the fizzy drinks killing off any nasties for me, fire killing fire, hydrating me across the years when I was a little far from home in lands without a creek or a cow trough.

Drinkable water proves unavailable from natural means. Folds of land that have for thousands of years drained our Earth have been shifted and damned, or lie sick, dry, or simply inaccessible. When a creek does exist, it is full of noxious weeds and a smattering of rubbish, shining like tinsel. If it all wasn't so interesting and disturbing, attractive to look at in an graffiti-type way, much of what you see and experience from the edge of a highway is depressing. It's not

lost on me that one of the busiest human thoroughfares in my country lacks the most basic element to sustain human needs.

I collect coins obsessively, which makes my eventual decision to spend them on a huge bag of chips and a double chocolate bar a little more deliberate, and unlike me, than a usual and incidental purchase from a highway servo. It also proves to be an insight into what makes money legal tender when the service station attendant took a few seconds to register that the handful of metal I pawed onto the counter was, in fact, money.

As I gain distance along the loud flanks of the highway, I don't noodle through the rubbish as much as I'd like, in the hope of finding clues to the owners, but I fantasise about it, stowing away anger for the rare occasion I might actually catch such people. Like the time Helen and I were at a stop sign in heavy city traffic and the driver of a car in front flicked his cigarette butt out the window. I got out of our car, picked up the smoking butt, threw it back into the man's car and unleashed a tirade of abuse, banging on the roof of his car while the man cowered (and tried to find the burning butt on his passenger side footwell). I surprised myself at my rage and my willingness to fight. Helen was one part proud to two parts scared at my response, as I was I actually, so quick to fire.

Most of the time I talk myself around, providing an alibi to the dirtbag by saying they know no better, or have a crumby life so they're paying for the atrocity in other ways. When particularly generous, the best of me asks whether a complete box of Arnold Schwarzenegger movies on VHS was indeed lost, or just forgotten, given its placement so neatly in the shade of tree.

Not wanting to carry loot for too long, but not wanting to pass up good opportunities, I start the serious process of looking for the ingredients of a bed with about three hours of daylight left. Swag-making is a multi-phased process of determining how much human filth is attached to whatever type of fabric I find, how waterproof and warm it is, how big it will be when gathered up, and how heavy it is. Creating a swag, which takes hours, and as much energy as looking for money as I pick over 20 km of roadside, is a lot more fun than going to a bedding store or mattress shop, although I still find I'm being upsold by an annoying salesman: myself. Every other kilometre I have an encounter with a less soiled pillow, a puffier towel, or a more appropriately shaped section of housing insulation, adding to my comfort, but inevitably making my luggage bigger. This truly is the swaggie's dilemma – what to take and what to leave behind, because walking with nothing is a wonderful thing, but to get something of a comfortable night of rest, I need all the plush things a highway has to offer.

I momentarily give a thought to the unknown owners of each piece of rubbish

I pick up. When I do decide to return something I've picked up to the roadside, I feel as if I have violated my moral code, as if I was the one now throwing it away, having momentarily taken ownership. Bolts, bricks, milled timber, roofing tiles and drill bits set me off thinking about the world's material ages: stone to bronze to iron, before the overwhelming prince of darkness emerged in endless forms of plastic. Synthetic concoctions never before mixed by nature are irreverently strewn along our pathways, like beautiful but noxious, unseasonal flowers. The outfall is staggering; all along the roadside there's a full spectrum of packaging eddied into culverts and shaken into size order, with the larger and blunt items layered on top. Shoes, mostly women's of a medium size, are common. Regular shapes of a circle, triangle and square, or overly straight items, divert my eye from the chaotic curves of the Australian bush. As I pick through an assortment of porn, wallets, asbestos, animal parts and suspiciously lumpy bags that I presume to be chopped-up humans – a tale of ill humanity mapped onto one right turn and one left turn over two days – I think of how I, like the rubbish I find, am part of this complex mega-highway.

The green glow of sleep

Strapped within a king-size duvet, housing insulation, and several towels, underlaid with cardboard given to me by friendly young folks at the Macca's drive-through, I wane between deep rest and the illusion of sleep. Most of the time I think in a filtered dreamscape of traffic noise and car doors. Soft rain feels oddly comforting when it passes by just after midnight. Small rivulets run down the sides of my swag and collect in folds beneath me, as if tucking me in.

Picking my place to sleep was not a fickle decision. Having hitchhiked laps of Ireland and Alaska on a micro-budget in years gone by, where every penny went towards ripe food and cheap beer, I've become well versed at sleeping in unnoticeable places. That is, sleeping in places that no one would expect a person to sleep, garnering the least interest from other sleepers, police, greenskeepers, publicans, posties or anyone else who tends to see what others don't. I'd picked out a few spots to sleep during regular commuting in the lead-up to the walk, shortlisting mongrel-looking hollows with cover from occasional bipeds. An equally important part of the real-estate choice was finding somewhere male drivers wouldn't pull over for a leak. If wild animals sniff me out, I'm likely doing something right, far enough from a beaten path and smelling like I sweated an awful lot to get there.

I have long thought about the sanctity of such places. Underwhelming, secretive, left-alone nooks lucky enough to have a few key ingredients that make them of little interest to humans. First, such places have sketchy access: they have no path and no road, and are often blocked by the barbs of nature or wire. Poor access can in fact make a place even more appealing to adventurous sorts, or dirtbags, especially when barriers hold back treasures like animals to hunt, chainsaws to steal, and high places with wide views in which to lose your virginity. People sniff these places out to make loud noises and profit in some way, thinking that no one else in the world would know of their presence, which is often true, especially in Australia, a staggeringly vast country.

I go to places that no one really owns, such as the wide variety of scrappy government lands that insulate roads, powerlines, drains, etc. Lie where you can see unlikely human approaches but where others can't see you, meaning you're in a place of darkness and they're in a place of light. If someone does suspect a body lying in the murk and makes their way towards you, you've seen them long before they think they've seen you, giving you a chance to retreat via a back route. Sleep in such spots is a half-sleep, with an ear cocked upwards and an eye half open to the world of unknowns, as if you're a new mother coming to terms

with the coos and cries of an infant.

I refined this simple set of rules while hitchhiking around Ireland, staying in a wonderful array of railway sidings, stairwells, roundabouts, and graveyards. After three weeks of odd sleeping places, my last week in Ireland was spent in a different lock-up each night at tiny, house-like police stations. I'd been sharing a pint one evening with a friendly gentleman, waxing on about his country of dinky roads and rock fences and my country's lack of an ozone layer, when we got around to talking about my travels. When I pointed to my large backpack in the doorway, the man didn't turn to look at the bag but still knew all about the flotsam hanging off the sides, such as my camera kit, and the bag's colour and brand. I suspected the bloke was a detective.

He asked where I was staying, to which I responded 'somewhere out of sight', knowing I would be sleeping in the hulking shadows of unused train carriages I'd seen on the edge of town.

'I see,' he said, before taking a long and breathless sip of his Guinness. 'Tell ya what, lad, I'm te local coppa in town and can putcha up in ta clink if cha like?'

'Great,' I said, happy that I'd picked my man, and that I would be going on to sleep the night on the hard bench of a warm police cell. I repeated the act for another week as I got passed on from one plain-clothed cop to the next.

My bedding by the roadside is within a thick stand of gorse, a horrific introduced weed with torturous spikes imported to keep stock within the confines of a paddock. It tends to grown in veins, much like a maze, with slinky alleyways and tight bends that lead to a poked eye and swearing. Purgatory is a perfect place to sleep. Eerie green light spews from the giant advertising beacon of a BP service station, and because it's inky black at ground level, I'm able to keep look-out for others. I feel safe.

Eyes half close at about 10 pm and half open again at 03:40 am. Time to go.

Fringe-dwelling and artfulness

I’m back on the road before the birds are up. In my shoe is half a marble in the form of a blister, which tells me I’m alive, and that my skin is only as good as the socks you put it in. Highway noise is constant and oppressive, but it fades to irrelevance when I’m not thinking about it. Every so often the tinnitus-like score rubber and combustion is shattered by a horn, often accompanied by a hooting jeer and fist pump from an open car window. I swear loudly at the driver for having scared the shit out of me. I understand road rage from a completely new angle, not as a biker or fellow motorist, but a biped in this non-human space. When I can’t stop the noise from bothering me any longer, I shove a small chunk of carpet underlay into each ear, as if blocking out road noise will encourage my inside noises come to the surface. They do. Two soundtracks roll out: the chug of my organs, my heart’s pulse and lungs’ breathing; and the sound of my clothes and feet. It turns out my own combustion can become as noisy as that of the road.

A small sense of calm ensues until I come upon a penis. Stopping dead, wary of the greying, once pink object, I notice immediately how odd the moment is. The scene takes on a fantastic sense of the avant-garde. Soft-hued morning sun pokes through distant trees, providing clean wedges of light within a muted highway world of black and grey. I stand within a thin wedge of the new day, as if subtly illuminating man and object for a photo shoot: ‘Man in red scarf holds penis beside peak-hour highway in first light of day’. I imagine Francophiles, enthralled by artfulness and weirdness, would buy the photo of this moment. Timing is everything. Half an hour ago, I stopped long enough in the swale of an emergency pullover bay to notice the roadside light go out. As the light flickered, a raft of moths dissipated in the diluted world of a cloudy day, no longer lusting after the artificial moon.

Seeing the moths disband reminds me of when I saw a gigantic grey whale off the tip of Africa in rough seas while I was paddling. The whale was like an up-close mountain range, and came and went in a moment, leaving me questioning the strength of my eyes and the honesty of my logic. Seeing the real and fake celestial bodies compete for moths' attention is an surreal experience, as is seeing a phallic body part that, for a split second, could have been real (it was a fake, massive, party straw made for fish-bowl sized cocktails and blushing brides-to-be I assume). Artful highway-side blends of human and animal natures can be profoundly beautiful when you have time to see them, then think about them, which is unforced during a long walk on easy terrain.

Granted, I'm hungry, which means I'm looking for distraction. As the sun breaks free of trees on the horizon, no longer splitting up light into hallways and spikes, one of the world's most rapidly expanding urban corridors gives me a sense of solitude no less powerful than I would feel in a vast desert. It feels impossible to listen effortlessly, as tends to be the case in what is often called 'untrammelled wilderness'. Not a single sign or sound of native animal movement exists by the highway, although roadkill is everywhere, strewn and

separated by speed. Instead, the occasional dog, and the occasional dog owner, barks at me aggressively from the back of a ute. I yell back at one stage at the top of my lungs, insulted at the invasion of my bubble. But in general, a dog's bark is soon drowned out by the speed of its owner and the gust of another dozen cars.

Remarkably, a sense of the wild remains in small chunks. Swamps and backwaters with shocks of native grass and clusters of eucalypts and melaleuca – huddling together like a football team – not worth draining or destroying hold on, saved perhaps as a future easement or human thoroughfare. Ancient ways persist in these rare spots, maintaining a touch of biodiversity and chaos, and the only place I witnessed from afar the confluence of natural order.

The other end

Eight and a half hours later, as I arrive at the lecture-cum-Q&A, the always moving, onward experience is overtaken with a feeling of loss. During the walk I rarely looked back. One doesn't tend to look behind them when they have the prospect of a destination and a long white line to follow. The indulgent capacity to stop and think beyond the moment exists mostly in the aftermath, and even then, you often have to make a mental note to do so. Having returned to platefuls of food and a room full of people, my first instinct is a brief feeling of guilt for my sense of ease, resting inside a large building with so much food water and shade.

With sun-cracked lip and tight hips, stinking to high heaven, I deliver my lecture. Heat radiates from my heel from a raised blister the size and thickness of a bottle top. I am beyond hobbling, owning the feel-good pain, much like the curious toothache that feels better when you bite down. The stories I tell are as immediate to my circumstances as any storytelling I've ever done; my words borne out by my unshowered state, soiled clothing and blooming freckles. This is precisely the point, I remind myself, of delivering a lecture about adventure from the immediate end to the journey itself.

For the record, I am 45 minutes early, and would have been earlier if I had not sat at the base of a pre-colony gum tree on the edge of Melbourne, leaning on its perfectly angled trunk. Knowing that I'd walked all but 8 km of the distance and could slow down, or rest, I felt the company of a grand old tree was too good to pass up. The great trunk felt heavy under my spine. I knew that I felt heavy against it, but I sensed my resting spot was a small act of human atonement, for there I was connecting with an ancient tree in a cultivated landscape of sports fields and carparks. And it felt good, really good, to take a short break in such company. I no longer expect to see trees with a long story to tell so close to a big road, especially so deep within suburbia. I reflect on the transect of farm to city, revealing a cross-section of human actions over time. We set ourselves up with an endless supply of carrots out in front. I know, because I do this myself for much of my day, which is much the same over a week and a year, which becomes your life, always looking ahead at the next thing to eat, do, decide upon. This doubles down when I eat modern, tasteless carrots, thinking that such wondrously large and resplendent vegetables must be curing half a dozen cancers I'm sure to have. Meanwhile, gnawing away on the giant orange mass, I'm busying myself doing side-projects because I was asked, kidding myself into thinking that nourishment is derived from busyness and the potentials of a giant

orange vegetable. Which is to say I should be eating carrots that are half the size while doing half as much because small carrots taste twice as good and are doubly nutritious. I thought this in the company of the old gum.

The entire walking experience, I mused, was an exposé of sensory intervention in the human world, from noise to smell to vision. By the time I left the cow-shit farmlands, my unexpected impression was of green fakery dressed up as velvet beauty, as my clear-felled home range is kept pretty and alive by ancient dirt and high rainfall. At first glance – which is a view I've held for most of my life – farmlands are attractive and effortless and nice because they are green, but they are far from natural, and a skewed version of 'pretty' based on my origin as a country kid who knew no better.

The highway was more obviously shaped by humans; hard-edged and sharp, deadened yet loud. Every kilometre towards the city added another decibel of in-your-face human activity and pressure. Swells of cars, culverts of rubbish, entrails of turtles and big-bang explosions of tyre rubber (you think you've been shot) were the outcome of humans in a rush. I lost count of the number of flappy tarps on trailers spewing out rubbish, pulled along by half-arse humans who don't know how to tie knots and lose half their load before they get to where they're going – half on purpose because they save on tip fees.

My role as a pseudo-swaggie observing eight lanes of combustion offered a first-hand view of a world to compare and contrast familiar ideas that I often think about, teach or despise. Walking along a highway could be a disappointing human reflection unless it offered me moments of wild resilience and insight. After 24 hours by the roadside, I'd stumbled upon a profound sense of wilderness, which if you think about it has remarkable similarities with how many governments define it; humanless (yet full of human risk), desert-like and misunderstood by the masses. Animalistic, perhaps, as only the strongest and most resilient life survives on a highway. I've come to compare versions of politically defined wilderness to that of country that's been walked upon, known about, used and shaped by thousands of human generations before the current one. Many current versions of wilderness ignore the people who have been here for many more millennia than our pens and paper have been recording it.

Malcolm Turnbull, one of our many prime ministers in the last ten years, was about 12 hours away from being voted out of his seat the same day a photo of me walking 90 km to work made the national papers. More people looked at my story than inquired about poor Malcolm. 'Man walks 90 km to work' was the most read article that day on a major news outlet in Australia. I imagine this says as much about the unnewsworthy nature of another leadership tussle in Australian parliament as it does about people being interested in something a

little different. Part chuffed, part surprised, I became aware of how attractive oddball stories are to many people, especially among their daily feeds of grim, dramatic and expected news. It’s not every day a bloke walks that far to work, and by default of being a little curious, so too was an audience.

CHAPTER 2:
PADDLE

Getting to know something I loathe

Having walked to work, I decide to try getting there by kayak. I've always liked the idea of using each chunk of me in different ways to see and experience the world differently, so I switch tarmac and legs for water and arms. At least, that's the idea.

I'm yet to zipper my wetsuit. It hangs like a limp, passed-out scarecrow I've tied around my waist. Famously bad at picking the fastest line at the supermarket, I'm equally useless at doing myself up in a full-length wetsuit. When I'm lying on my back, you can pass a water bottle under me from one side to the other without touching my spine. And my post-hole-digging, paddling shoulders are as meaty and stiff as my hamstrings, meaning my back hasn't been cleaned properly for 39 years. People within asking distance, many I've never met before, have zipped up my wetsuit more than I have. Until help arrives, with the steady hands of Chris or Mitch, the filmmaking team, I'm undone. Waiting until the last minute to zip up also means I can empty myself without having to go through the sweaty pain-in-the arse process of removing head-to-toe neoprene.

Departure routines are a known quantity for me, after 20 years of coming and going, often living from the contents of a backpack or drybag. At least, they are normally. Stripping back a paddling trip to bare bones requires a bit more scrutiny, as there are some genuine safety concerns when you're sitting on moving water, then open sea, buoyed by only 2.5 mm of plastic hull. Today I've become indecisive, which is unusual for me. At the core of being dim-witted – which I try to remedy by palming my temples to work blood in to oil the slow-moving cogs – was how much safety paraphernalia I take with me.

It's sometimes hard to jettison the safety nets we carry as guides. Having learned from our own backlog of stuff-ups and near misses means a guiding life, swaddled in the risk averse structures of peak bodies within the outdoor industry, is one of compromise. Adventuring by myself is to strip things back a little, leaning up the endless safety nets we assume as professionals. It means applying the best bits of caring for others, to yourself, while happily going without a giant bag of insurance we call first aid. These days I take a bare bones blister kit,

saving me from the feet up.

From my spot on the deck at home, leaking off the edge, the nippy air of winter produces an immensely satisfying arch of steam. I know that later on, somewhere down the line, that heated-steamy goodness will give me an unbridled balm of warmth when I convince myself that leaking into a half-dry wetsuit is a good idea.

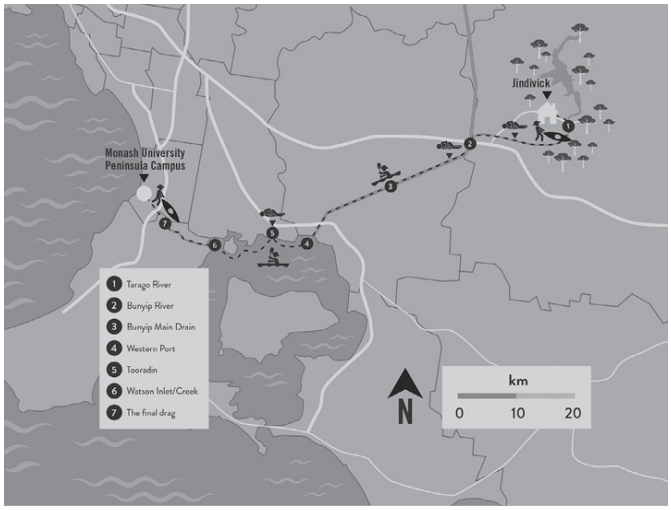
I've been up since dawn loading a red 10-foot river kayak with a few days' worth of supplies that will keep me alive in my attempt to paddle to work, although based on my knowledge of what's in the river, the watery commute will entail as much dragging as it will paddling. I expect the paddle/drag will take two full days, sleeping in a waterside hinterland as I go, but I also expect to be wrong, and take a $20 note in case things get a little more serious, meaning more time and more bananas.

As on most mornings, I've thrown down a pot of coffee and a large bowl of fruity-oaty-bog. This morning's dose was doubled, as I know that slow and sticky energy is the right kind of burn, especially when paired with the ping of the black stuff. I can't remember the last time I cleaned the porridge pot, a hangover of the one-cup, one-spoon, one-bowl bachelor days. The pot simply gets used, drowned in water, and left to ponder in the sink. Each morning when I'm on the deck, where my best thinking is done, I flick the previous day's porridge scum into roughly the same place I leak and restore the pH balance of the lawn, which makes it the healthiest chunk of grass on the property.

Hour-ago oats expand exponentially in my stomach to make me look like I have an early baby bump. I moth about two piles of stuff, one in the barn and the other in the centre of the house, continually reducing a broad inventory of kit to the essentials. Water will be the most important element of my commute so next I turn to water considerations, including my supply of drinking water, checking river levels and water temperature, looking up dam releases and tide times. Then there's the red-headed business of covering my face with sunscreen, which is much like painting the backside of the shed; it goes on rough and thick. Helen often reminds me that I would not get a job as a sunscreen applicator, at least not if it's supposed to be applied softly or romantically. My face in summer is much like a half-finished abstract painting. A part of me can't believe she married that face.

When Mitch and Chris arrive, I've got a small pile of kit together, wetsuit booties are on, and a fresh cup of tea to see me out of the house. Mitch zips me up. By the time I've made it to the barn I'm feeling genuinely excited and, I won't lie, a bit nervous about how long this half-baked commute will take and how hard it will be. I have no idea how far I'll get on day one, and even less of

an idea beyond that. Distance vs time, police interventions, equipment failings, and my own thresholds of energy and desire are relatively unknown. Nearly everything about the experience is abstract and hypothetical, which is exactly why I’m excited and nervous, meaning I need to leak again, which is a pain in the arse because I’m all zipped up.



Just follow the water, man

Huck Finn had the Mississippi, I have the Tarago. Past the old tip, flowing east to west under a two-lane bridge with white railing, the river felt like another country to me as a freckle-faced kid. With a fishing rod and a jar of worms I learnt the art of trespassing on the banks of the Tarago. It was where I caught my first trout, a little shocked, and first crayfish with a pair of Mum's old stockings and a chunk of uncooked sausage. The Tarago is one of two rivers in the world where I've seen a platypus.

These days, our small farm, five minutes' drive from my childhood home, sits on a south-east facing hill that drains into the ancient little groove, adjacent to a road that intersects the river 2.8 km away. Headwaters are in the gummy Yarra Ranges to the north, part of the Tarago and Bunyip state parks. First trickles of the river cut below three prominent rocks in thick bushland called the Three Sisters, near Gentle Annie Camp, where my Year 11 geography class tested turbidity and pH balance on the foot-wide stream. The eastbound stream gathers up enough water to become a river by the time it heads south, then west, towards its final destination of Western Port Bay on the south coast of mainland Australia. I like the thought of a tiny percentage of rain that falls on my little farm making its way into the open sea of Bass Strait – the superhighway of the Southern Ocean – a week or two after it makes a sound on my roof.

Like nearly every vein of water in this continent, the Tarago has been fiddled with. In truth, it's been completely changed. Dammed in 1969 as the Tarago Reservoir, most of its mid to lower reaches were deforested and heavily farmed by the early 20th century. Pockets of bushland exist in the hardest-to-reach sections, and the headwaters feel as though they belong to a prehistoric era, with their tiny beaches of golden sands shrouded by the world's largest ferns and hardwoods. At about the same point the stream turns to river, a place where I've fished, and run, and sat, birdsong of the deep bush blends with the meandering hum of moving water. Pure order in all its wildness seems to exist in the first furlongs of the little river. Not long after it leaves the forest, damned, farmed and nude, it limps to the sea as a sick version of its former self. The Boonwurrung people know of the old and vibrant river, full of blackfish and dwarf galaxias and all the other species that are now gone or on the brink.

Fresh-thinking farmers are returning the river to a more native state, surrounded by gums, shrubs and ferns, but for the most part, my descent of the Tarago will be a battle against willows, blackberries and fences. Nothing but a rude fringe of vegetation exists along the majority of its farmed flanks. The

Tarago, like many other short rivers, breaks from the hills and heads to the sea, taking in every crinkle of lowland it can find, and, like most rivers, it takes a curly path of least resistance. By the time it gets a bit of steam up to make 4.5-m-wide sections, the Tarago collides with – and takes on the name of – the Bunyip River, an equally sized, equally pilfered stretch of water. The merged rivers death is imminent 4 km downstream of the confluence, when the already sick waterway hits a bolt-straight canal system scandalously called the Bunyip River. Yellow machines operated by hard-hatted workers have pushed up fat banks either side of the drain to contain, I presume, thousand-year rains. (I have no idea why they wear hard hats – there are no longer trees around to fall on them.) The river-drain will never flood again, with smaller drains diverting any hint of bank-busting levels to arms and legs either side, feeding more farms and pumps. Incredibly rich lands of silted earth, a product of ancient floods, are now locked away in small chunks to grow a huge range of crops. For now, at 38 degrees south, there's little the soil can't grow. Houses are built directly on top of the chocolate soil, immune to inundation – the very inundation their livelihood is built upon.

White Australia is relatively fresh out of the box, having moved into a staggeringly old continent bringing pitched rooves and fences. Many families that dot the hills around my small piece of cultivated land are fifth-generation forester-cum-farmer. We're all part of the historical reason the river has taken a radical turn in the past century, and I know I'm a part of its demise. I'll pass a dirt road named after a relative before I get to the sea, and eat apples grown from the watershed. Neither road nor apple are bad, products of their circumstances, but I've recently felt discomfort with all the greenness and brownness and straightness and lack of significant signs that it was once, not long ago, a place of complexity. For the most part my imagination has to fill in the gaps.

Flooding tides from Western Port Bay inundate the waters of the Bunyip for the last few kilometres of its canal-locked journey. After the river hits the highway, between the towns of Tooradin (meaning 'swamp monster', thus the naming of the 'Bunyip' river) and Kooweerup (meaning blackfish), it makes an almost secretive entry into Western Port. Like the ginormous 100-mile-wide delta of islands associated with the rivers of the Amazon, making it almost impossible to know where the actual river flows and what is an archipelago of silty islands it created, the opposite can be said of this once-river that looks like a farmer's dam has melted into the bay. At least, that's what it looks like from the final bridge that crosses the watercourse, seen from the seat of a car on a section of highway only a few hundred metres from the mouth. If you care to look at this point, at a full measure of speed from the highway, you see where the little

brown river turns green.

Western Port is the plughole for dozens of creeks and small rivers that surround its sizable girth. One of these is Watsons Creek, weaving its last kilometre or two through the white mangroves of the shallow edge. On the north-western edge of the Western Port bulge, it heads directly towards my place of work in Frankston, although on my commute it will leave me about 12 km short of the university itself. When the water, or groove of suggested water, runs out, I'll drag my kayak up roads and walkways, sliding along in the roadside drains, which carry as much water as any natural fold of land. Being careful to close gates and avoid confrontations with territorial farmers and their loyal dogs, I'll drink water from cattle troughs, service stations and any tap I can see.

All told, by following the Tarago and Bunyip rivers, which join to become the Bunyip Main Drain, then across the northern bulge of Western Port and up Watsons Creek before finally following a crude north-west bearing towards the seaside town of Frankston, I aim to paddle (and drag) my way to work.

By the numbers

Google has the Tarago–Bunyip running a course of 49 km from the dam wall to the mouth at Western Port, then 30 km from Western Port to Watsons Creek, and another 30 km for the Watsons Creek paddle/drag section. In high water with no snags the total distance is around 120 km of paddling, but given I'll have to do a lot more dragging, the trip full of hard yakka getting through, across, around and over endless obstacles, could be as much as 150 km. At this time of year, the winter solstice of late June, I get about ten usable daylight hours within a typical temperate range of three to 15 degrees Celsius. Being optimistic, I peg travel time at 20 hours, but know in my heart of hearts I'm being daft and it could be double this, and then some. In work terms I'm chewing of the equivalent of three to five full work days just to get to my office, which is 30 to 40 times longer than my regular commute. Statistically, clearly, this is a very inefficient way to get to where I want to go.

As an 85 kg arm- and leg-driven biped, I estimate a burn of about 120 calories for every kilometre I travel, based on the rule of thumb that a walk or run on easy ground, at roughly sea level, burns about 60 calories per kilometre, and paddling about 40. I'm doubling the energy output based on past experience, having busted my arse on similar kinds of stints before and knowing it isn't a walk, or paddle, or drag, in the park. Apples aren't apples when it comes to comparing distance and energy across the various ways we might enact our forwardness. Comparing a lap around the block with your golden retriever while listening to a podcast to wading through a blackberry-infested quagmire patrolled by bulls and rimmed with endless barbed-wire fences, snags, rapids and tunnels is more like comparing apples and watermelons. In fact, you can keep adding up the calorie count when you combine activities; I'll be essentially running and paddling at the same time when I drag the kayak across land, with the weight of my sleigh (kayak plus gear) added to my body as a combined mass pitted against gravity. When I roll out this math, I estimate my paddle commute to work will burn up to 18,000 calories, which is 171 bananas, or seven marathons.

Kayak and kit

French-made, red, the sexy little 10-foot ‘Dag’ kayak is part of the university’s fleet of day-use river kayaks. They have a tip-to-tail rocker, meaning they have a curved hull the shape of your bottom lip when you open your mouth to talk. No hard edges to speak of; everything is rounded, made for manoeuvrability and slipperiness. Dags can track nicely when the paddler knows how to measure their strokes, but they’re not made for straight lines. The cockpit is tighter than that of a sea kayak, with moulded foot pegs and an adjustable backrest, but still has enough room for you to paddle with either frogged knees, locked into position under knee braces either side, or knees touching directly in front, much like an ocean paddler. You paddle the craft differently in each position, depending on conditions, your flexibility, and if your hamstrings feel like monkeys are swinging on them like vines.

As a sea kayaker used to long hauls, I’m a knees-in-front man, driving through the toes. My ankles are also pretty stiff, refusing to bend beyond my long-term, non-stretching-runner limits. A spray-skirt or ‘deck’ would usually seal me into the cockpit, elasticised around the cockpit combing, keeping the water out, but given I’ll be constantly in and out of this kayak – likely a lot more out than in, for days to come – I’ll depart without one. The grab loops at each end of the kayak mean I can tow from the stern or bow using a bungee-cord towline and several carabiners. I suspect the hauling, pulling, dropping over edges, and in-out nature of the A to B will be a brutish and blunt experience. It’s a huge workload and, much like the sledding physicality of polar explorations, a river descent like this is about one chunk at a time, small wins, and not stopping. Like an umbilical cord, the towline will have me in contact with the craft for the entire journey. Wherever I go, the kayak comes with me.

Equipment

Unlike for the walk, where I left with only the clothes on my back and cobbled together whatever I needed to live while travelling, I will take some kit with me. My thinking is that the watery course to work will have less on offer in terms of habitable junk, edible scraps and money.

The initial pile of kit in the barn is sizable. Stupid actually for someone who should know better. Even after a few rounds of culling, it's way too big. First-aid kit, clothing, cooking equipment, shoes and super-calorific food make it look like I'm taking a kid across country. Luckily, the space in the back of the kayak is tiny, meaning I can only take so much. Shoving an air-filled 5-litre drybag each side of the kayaks' foam spine gives me 10 litres of storage; five of gear and five of food. I'll also shove a 5-litre water bladder below my feet. Loose in the cockpit will be a tow-leash, a tube of sunscreen and a water bottle.

I've landed on the rule of fives: five litres of space each for food, clothing and water. Enough for a full-tilt adventure over a few days, with scope for topping up in a few towns as I go. I've used similar rules of thumb for hiking over the years. Students at first think it's bonkers reducing life to a seemingly arbitrary figure, but a line in the sand produces great question-asking and decision-making. You get to know the difference between needs and wants when you haul things with your body, especially when you reduce a beefcake pack full of luxuries and what-ifs into a nimble ballerina. Camping stores nowadays stock nearly every conceivable contraption that mirrors home life, made into comically small and light versions, which Disney-fy the whole experience. Barely needing such contraptions at home, let alone on an overnight hike, I find it odd that anyone would feel compelled to take a miniature cheese grater with them.

I feel a little naked without a knife on trips, so a folding knife, albeit with one side of the handle missing, gets the nod. Remembering that I had to break glass to cut up layers of carpet and roofing insulation during the walk, I reflect that the world took a turn when humans started using sharp objects – a blade in our hands makes us a different kind of hunter. Rule of knives: keep them sharp. A blunt knife is dangerous, frustrating, and defeats the purpose of being a knife.

A medium-sized tub of Vaseline, a roll of duct tape and a 1-metre strip of Fixomull dressing makes the final cut in case I need to treat dents, cuts and abrasions and lubricate moving parts as I repeat, repeat, repeat. A headtorch, a remarkable device of the LED era, makes it in to help me with early morning starts and help others see me during dimly lit paddling. Also included are a bivy sack (short for bivouac, meaning temporary shelter), which is a tiny tent of sorts;

a small lightweight tarp with guy lines and four pegs; a down jacket (as sleeping bag); a pair of thick woollen socks and long johns for bed; a beanie; a good-quality lighter; a $20 note for food; and a spoon and toothbrush. All items get the air sucked out of them when they're shoved, squeezed and burped into a roll-top drybag. Note: a lot of my camping kit smells like soy sauce, because soy sauce is a Houdini at escaping any kind of container – especially when the container also houses important items like a phone, passport or liquorice – as drybags also keep liquids in, infusing everything. A golden rule of outdoor life: don't put soy sauce, liquids, bananas or vindaloo sauce in a drybag.

My red scarf that I found on my walk to work is with me, as are my office keys. The last and most specialised piece of kit is a 212-cm Shuna paddle, made by Werner paddles. It's a beautiful piece of kit that pulls apart as a 'break' or 'split', meaning the paddle shaft comes apart in the middle with a fancy socket and button, which is excellent for travel and storage. Light, powerful, strong as heck, the paddle embodies me during a long day in the kayak, as if my blood runs to the very tip of the blades.

Good gear is worth repairing and worth learning how to repair. You rely on good gear like a trained set of lungs and muscles because it allows you to simplify, reduce, modify and do more. It's less about sentimentality and more about the ability to have bigger experiences with less moving parts. Old-timers have done this forever, and for some reason younger generations take their time learning what the last generation know so well.

On my head is a limp, overworn legionnaire's hat with bad velcro. Shoved next to my gear bag, freewheeling, is my red cag (from the French *cagule*), which is a neoprene-sealed (waist, cuffs and neck) shell jacket. Both hat and cag are faded red and blue, baked versions of their former selves. I fear both will dissolve into thin air any day, but for now they feel soft and real and still a few seasons away from the end. Wetsuit booties and black gardening gloves mean I'm head to toe the colour of crude oil, which makes sense because that's what my garments are made of. The cherry on top, down below, is a well-worn pair of undies. Sealed up and slick, warming from within, I become impervious to the weather world. At least, that's the idea.

Food is ultra-basic; that is, not germy or offensive to my tastebuds, which, granted, are not all that offendable. Half a dozen tightly clustered bananas, six tins of beans, three tins of tuna, a dozen muesli bars, 500 grams of dates, two bruised apples, a large chunk of yesterday's damper, and five thin-skinned oranges left to roll around the hull with the tinned goods.

While I'm forever loyal to the wonder of bananas, they suck to take on voyages, and they're only getting a run on this trip because they need to be

eaten. Oranges are the ticket, in no need of packaging, being carefully packed, no prospect of going bad too soon, even when soaked in the brackish bilge of a kayak for days. To treat myself, as if picnicking, and to make myself a little more excited for lunch on day one, I'll take a sandwich, shoved high behind the seat to avoid inundation by a slurry of river water. I'll top up food supplies as needed in the towns of Bunyip or Tooradin. Worst case, if I find myself hungry between towns, I'll knock on a farmer's door and ask nicely for a slice of bread or a cup of milk.

No more faff

Lashing the fully packed kayak to my wheelbarrow, red scarf hitched around my neck, booties on, I walk the 2.8 km to the river. I stash the wheelbarrow in the bush, to be collected on the other side of the commute, and have a final leak. A moment of deep tiredness sweeps over me. After such a busy few days of whittling down myself and my stuff, excitement wears off during the walk down the hill and I realise just how stuffed I am, which is a horrible thought to have when you haven't even started. Unlike the walk, brilliant in its simplicity and sustainability through a known distance, time, route and cadence, commuting via water was a decision-making bonanza. I have a Google-eye view of what is in front of me, but at ground and river level nothing is certain.

It's common to be stuffed on day one for trips like this, where you've lived a little anxiously for preceding days as you try to square away regular life; emails, bills, lawns, relationships, work, which is only half of it. Just as much energy goes into convincing yourself that the idea is worthy of all the bother, and not a waste of your time, and a horrendous display of ego when others are involved. Combine these two anxieties, which could be said as being the good kind of stress, is also where the reality of burning a week's worth of calories in a day is a huge reality check. I smack into this home truth when I make it to the river and I feel that deep sense of weariness, knowing that the energy burn starts now. If you're not careful, you could convince yourself at this point that commuting via water to work, which is really going to be more land than water, is a stupid idea.

Perfectly, a loose orange rolls into my hand as I adjust myself into the kayak, so I eat it chased with a deep slug of water. It's enough to make me feel like starting, which at this point is all I need, a push. I enter the water from a small bridge, paddling five strokes before willow roots clogging the river have me out and dragging in knee-deep mud. So begins the great con of paddling to work.

For the next ten hours the great majority of my forward motion, S-ing my way towards sea, comes from dragging. The opportunity to drift in several sweet sections barely warrants having lugged along a large piece of floatable plastic, but by golly it's nice when it comes. My wetsuit protects me from most of the blackberries and sword grass, and the shock of the cold water is gone after the first river bend as I steam up my artificial layer of skin from within. It makes sense that superheroes are always in body-hugging gear: not just to show off their high-protein diets, but to slip around the place with cat-like spatial awareness. As I slime my way towards sea, the river and I go about our business of least resistance.

The neoprene-wrapped human, like the sharp-object-wielding human, is perhaps a landmark advancement of the embodied biped. As long as I keep moving, the wetsuit keeps me moist in a luscious warmth. Downed branches,

rocks, barbed wire and blackberries snag the full depth of the neoprene instead of my relatively shallow skin.

By 11 am I'm thinking of the bread I've brought, destination focused by the reward of food. Pavlov's dog has nothing on me in terms of being motivated by food, particularly when I peg its promise to a particular spot at a particular time. The first bridge I come to, overlooked by a small triangular property my uncle and aunty once owned and in which they planted trees that dwarf the house, is my snack point. I do a piece to camera about taking far too long to get here, realising that I'm three hours into the commute and I've actually gone the opposite direction to work. Eating my bread too fast, I re-evaluate, thinking that tonight's camp will be well short of a particular bridge I had in mind – a junction of road over river about 12 minutes into my regular commute. Leaving Mitch and Chris at the bridge, I get back to good old-fashioned swearing at things, although I'm enjoying myself immensely, resigning myself to the fact that this is one heck of a way to get to work.

Everything ends up as river

My vantage point from the middle of the river, which is a sliding view that stops and starts, makes me think of digestion. If you spent the weekend inside someone's gut, I imagine you'd have a good idea of the person's health based on what you see, especially if you know what to look for. The pros and cons of our species also become abundantly clear from the watery centre of a river. Inflow from walkers, anglers, road users, government workers, hunters, graffiti artists is all there.

Farmers, of course, expose their spleen. On one river bend will be a patch of remnant or untouched bushland booming with health and vitality, with fat cows in good fencing kept at bay, only for a raw and pugged bank, with skittish cattle and crap fencing, to come into view around the corner. Farmers, I imagine, are representative of their river frontage; when not much is going on at the watermark of a bank, not much is going on with the farmer. I feel bad saying this, knowing that many have inherited not much from their parents in terms of river- and land-care knowledge. They are repeating what they experienced, saw, and endured as a kid, and I can't blame them, at least not entirely.

It's obvious to me which sections of the river are healthy and unhealthy, and it's obvious to anyone who cares to look. The healthier the river is, the more often I get snagged and twisted in wild and unkempt sections that have beautiful clusters of gums and ferns and rotting branches. Clear-fell sections are easy to access, denuded either side, snagless, shadeless, lifeless. I curse the farmers' forebears for taking away the canopy. My internal wetsuit thermometer spikes when I encounter a bad farm, boiling away under a cold winter sky.

First night camp

For ten hours, minus the short lunch break not far from home and a few attempts at getting the wetsuit on and off in a timely manner to leak, I hit a familiar dirt road and decide to make camp. I'm not the first to do such a thing here, as I see fire scars visible in the last light of day. A torn condom wrapper hangs in the remnants of tall summer grass. I look upon it as if I'm seeing the first square flower in history. I don't dwell on the discarded remnant of sex, as the broader scene is far too attractive to be tarnished. I have known this spot my entire life, although it's been far enough out of my regular routes to have been an irregular part of it. Still, at various points of my childhood I remember fishing here, and more recently sitting in this patch of river with my sister and best mate during a 40-degree day. We were renovating a house at the time, and had worked until paint dried on our brushes and overheating power tools needed to be put in the fridge intermittently to cool them down. When Rowy painted a window blue that should have been white, we knew it was time to head to the river. We wallowed in the muddy banks cooling our lower halves while our torsos baked, thinking life was pretty good.

If I was to do an inventory of my nights during my twenties, I would calculate spending as many nights on a camp mat as nights in a bed. Because of this I prefer board-like mattresses and fresh air on my face whenever I sleep. I've never really thought of liking life outside, only of how much I question being inside, so my native self enjoys nesting, much like a dog doing circles before coiling into a ball. Finding the place to lie down outside entails a calibration of the obvious parameters, knowing where the sun comes up and what direction the wind will come from, before I overlay risks, such as condom users in cars for example. Being out of harm's way from the kind of person who likes dead-end roads where a river runs is high on the list.

Fire lit, staring dim-witted at the flames as so many knackered people have before me, I tell myself the day is done. Deep tiredness takes over. I lie down on my bed roll and pulse my body in chunks, which is to relax every part of yourself, then from head to toe turn on, and off, every muscle you can single out. Pulsing this way is a ritual I've done after hard days of toil since I ran the Australian Alps, which shocks me to think was five years ago. Slowly and surely applying equal measure of nerves, blood and thought to as many pieces of me I can reach, I feel out delicate feedback from places I often forget about. Most of the time my prime movers come back at me with a deep voice telling me to back away and look elsewhere. Small bits of me have occasionally revealed

themselves in rude health, like the small muscles behind my ears, feeling fresh and ready to go. But not today. The obvious pillars of my legs, wound-up shoulders, clenched bum, clawed toes, and flared nostrils as are spent as the disks of flesh behind my ears, coin-sized operators that have scanned all day for gunning motorbikes and the yell of landowners. Dragging a kayak across farmlands is bloody hard work and feeling out my body is to feel every inch of water, mud and land between here and home.

Not wanting to rekindle the flames, I stare down a young fire dying fast, shovelling down a tin of beans with the last of my damper. Fat slugs of water seem to expand me and my stomach in a matter of moments. Impatient to be resting, the last rush of the day is to be jammed full of food and water before allowing myself sleep. Dressed in everything I've spent the day in, I switch out booties and cag for down jacket, woolly socks, and beanie. Cocooned in my bivy bag, I feel the icky layer of dirty, sweated-up wetsuit in a way I never have before, a feeling much like being buried alive, submissively letting go amid all the sweat and protest. Lying between small road and small river, I sleep against my kayak, a spooning-type arrangement where I feel plastic hull against various bumps of my body, a habit I made in Africa during many nights worrying that my boat would be stolen while I slept. Then, having gone through a range of known and unknown habits, I let go of my thoughts, caring little for being disturbed, run over, robbed, or arrested. Head resting on muddy cag, sound of running water close to my head, I feel all the tension in the world carried downstream and I'm asleep in a minute. I don't wake until I hear the *bub-bub* sound of a distant farmer's motorbike gathering up cows for the morning milking, although it could have been my bladder telling me that it was about to burst, which I remind myself is not the worst thing in the world when you're covered in neoprene.

Day 2

My paddle trip, which is really a dragging trip, is looming ahead of me because I know it's going to take more time that I thought, so I must forget days and times and expectations of where I should be and simply get on with the job of finding a way through. Such thinking relieves me of myself and gives me time to think about people who have been here before me. Going backwards, I descend into white and then black history, mashing my slippery presence with an imagined past. Yes, I am classically adventurous in that I have a set of deep and fleshy motivations that compel me onwards, or to stop, camp, dress a wound, or eat, based on a time–distance–body relationship that's sometimes hard to explain, but I am otherwise a creature of distraction and side-thinking. I wonder about the naming of the river, the original inhabitants of the river, of fish species that were once in abundance, and the staggering disparity of river health from one farm to the next. Romanticising about the wildness of this place takes over, and I know that this is my thinking self taking the reins, instead of following my overtly practical self, who focuses on my muscles and time, counting things as I go. When it's cold enough, and it is cold enough today, I search out third-party distractions, which allow me to forget I'm doing any kind of distracting and ignore my woody feet and swollen hands. I've found that the colder it gets, the better your self-serving con has to be, otherwise all you think about is your hands and feet that are slowly dying.

The shortest day of the year is suitably the coldest. (I check this later, and yep, the -3-degree morning, dead still and cloudless, was the chilliest of the year.) I make ground slowly through the twists and turns of the wide, white, country of river flats. No longer in the foothills of my childhood, I enter the domain of my teens, where my circle of influence grew. I pass a paddock where I drank one of my first ever beers as a 16-year-old and immediately became drunk, thinking the world was marvellous and wobbly. I spend the next 30 minutes recounting the faces and events of that evening, and I feel embarrassed, smiling at my younger self. I bludgeon on, encouraging blood flow via peppy self-talk and blowing my hot breath to warm things up, but neither really works. Today I have to wait for my sometime-nemesis, the sun, to help out.

As I get closer to the sea and foothills ease out to become small bumps, then river flats wide enough to be a sea itself, it is the way humans meddle with the riverscape that impacts how I get downstream. Landowners, more than geography, or at least enabled through a certain kind of geography, all but kill the very thing that made their land so profitable in the first place. At one turn I

encounter half-a-dozen dead dairy cows in various states of decay. Their beautiful black-and-white hides are either bloated or tight against their large frames. For some reason I can't smell them, although, when I think about it, I realise I'm screwing up my face to close down the vents of my nose. It's a shocking scene so close to the river, but one I imagine has been prevailing since farming came to the area. Cutting a corner I run directly into a crumbling anabranch – ancient, or seldom-used ventricles of a river system when in flood, full of old farm machinery and general farm junk, rusty iron replacing sedimentary dirt in a strange swap of new for old.

At the confluence of the Tarago and Bunyip rivers, I have a hard time being Beau. While I'm no longer cold, my sunny optimism vacates me. I stew in the Y-shaped scene, hating my kind. A raised highway on stilts of concrete supplies a soundtrack of trucks and cars as I scan the 360-degree view, searching for signs of healthy life. I take in a few scraggly native trees, great balls of blackberry, rutted wheel marks of people who don't get out of their cars other than to leak or leave rubbish, and thick lustrous willows with an array of strained plastic on their downstream tentacles. Even my trusted on-the-go lunch of tuna and beans gets shovelled down without sense of reward. I'm ashamed of what humans can do to once-healthy rivers.

I eat and leak, then talk to the lads, who have caught me at this confluence of road, rivers and mood, and move on. The whip-cracking blue stillness of a cold, clear day shifts effortlessly into a bleak wintry afternoon at the hands of a biting southerly, the wind coming directly, unfettered, from Antarctica. It's hard to shake my pessimism as I push a little slower towards my night beneath two bridges, one old and one new.

Second night camp

I leave the deep groove of the old river at dusk. Everything is slippery and muddy and glossed over. I grab momentarily, unsuccessfully, at a rotting post of the 1880s Bunyip River train bridge and realise how clawed my hands are, cold, and getting colder. Above me is the imposing concrete-and-steel replacement bridge of the 1950s. After sliming my way to the tip of the embankment, shoving my hands in my armpits and jogging on the spot, it starts to rain. Winter has shifted from a biting cold via a white-blue day to a night descending in every shade of grey, colder, and clouded over. Because it makes me feel like hunkering down in every ounce of clothing I have, forcing me to stop and take care of myself, the weather feels oddly comforting.

As I hurry through an end-of-day chat with Mitch and Chris, I finally look at the bridges from an angle I've never seen them from before, having only passed this spot during dawns and dusks every other day on my way to work. I assume both bridges were utilitarian when designed and made, without an ounce of intended beauty. Yet now, an era or two down the track, they are both handsome and pleasing to look at. The massive steel I-beams painted in rust-repelling paint is the colour of half-ripe persimmons, and in complete contrast to the blackened angles and cross-member remains of the older bridge.

I eye off a human-sized plot between two great pillars of concrete, somewhat protected, halfway between trainline and river. In truth I never thought I'd spend my second night here, imagining this as a morning snack spot, or even where I should have been last night. While worn out and ready to be dead still and twice as warm, the scene I find myself in seems extra pretty in the fading light, the bitterly cold wind and low clouds. The only colour left in the day is fading orange paint of the newer, 70-year-old bridge.

I set up the small tarp as a wind buffer, diverting wind and rain over my bivy bag. Knowing the train schedule pretty well after 30 years of use, I know I'm in for two trains an hour until about 11 pm, one going each way. Deeper sleep will be thoroughly shattered by freighters passing by on and off throughout the night meaning rest will be in timetabled bursts, split into chunks via hundreds of tons rolling over my head.

Within ten minutes of setting up, my headtorch is on. I turn it off when I hear the train, the impressive sound of power and wheels and weight thundering from the west. The concrete pillars vibrate, as do I, and the guy lines on my tarp start dancing. Everything responds to the high-speed passing, before going back, cautiously at first, to the sounds of the night.

Day 3

Day three is remarkable because I thought I'd be at work by now, or at least a lot bloody closer. Never have I been so wrong on how long something will take. I secretly like the fact that the river is kicking my arse, but at the same time feel a growing sense of pessimism at myself for not knowing better, and others past and present for making things seem so unnatural and sharp on this once healthy waterway. It's a perfect concoction for being downright pissed off with the world when both yourself and your genus are bastards at that very moment. And I'm almost out of food, which means almost hungry, so getting to a roadside stand, service station, or bakery has become as much of a priority as finding the sea. I actually don't mind being hungry every so often, it makes for interesting trips and narrows your focus, but a bad river that's barely a river anymore along with having no food is a poor combination for a bloke who thought he'd be writing emails by now instead of banging around in a ditch with a broken idea of how long things take.

Having woken up with the first passenger train of the day, I break camp and slurp myself into mudded-up booties and wet cag. It's not as cold as morning two, but it's bleak, taking on the full vanguard of midwinter. My first surprise is a beautiful, albeit straightened, stretch of canal that's surrounded by gum trees and tea trees, without a single willow. There are snags of branches from trees that ought to be there, and an azure kingfisher, adding to the natural order of things, lands in front of me and is in no hurry to move as I back-paddle and watch it flit between a perfectly elusive shard of sunlight. It is magical, and the finest river scene I've encountered so far. Five minutes later and I'm back in the thick of willows, blackberries and an increasing number of small corrugated sheds housing pumps, having hit the fertile, pan flat, floodplains. Cows give way to corn and cabbages, which require large quantities of water, meaning pumps are getting bigger and pipes getting fatter.

Culverts of Middle-earth where orcs throw their bones have nothing on this horrible place. Picking a line through the barbed, whipping, shit-strewn labyrinth proves me wrong more than I like, which has me going upstream, backwards, to take on another rabbit hole through the mess. I swear at the camera as if I've been sent down the river to repent for something I didn't do, or don't believe in. I'm livid, and come close to losing my voice. When an arm of blackberry releases from my ear and dives into my wetsuit, ripping free a coin-sized chunk because I can't halt the thrust of me and my kayak in the current, I concede. Stopping for a leak, I unzip layers and talk myself down over a muesli bar. With

something in my gob to stop me spouting off I realise my anger is useless. It's full-blown adventure, I remind myself, and I've chosen to be here. Bursting a jugular vein isn't going to help get me any closer to open water, nor the mouth-watering idea of a bakery. Besides, being physically pumped, bloody, no longer cold with the gut busting workload, and alone, was exactly what I've come for. I know, and in fact have come to rely on, the fact that I actually enjoy the toil because always, without fail, a bad situation eventually turns into something else.

I quickly, almost shockingly, emerge from the dirty, bastardised waterway into reedy, open water that will go all the way to the sea. It's still an unnatural and pilfered place, strewn with floating kids' toys and knots of bailing twine, but the absence of willows and blackberries marks a timely shift in the type of human meddling I'm witnessing. Cut at their bases, thousands of trees, both introduced and native, are shorn from the perfectly tapered banks. Work crews have only just gone through, and chips of chainsaw meal are still freshly strewn about the place. Other than getting out for engineered fish ladders – human-made rapids constructed from newly crushed quartzite that allow fish to swim upstream, often to get around the blockage of a small dam (also human-made) – I paddle like a sea kayaker, relatively direct, the next 25 km to a highway juncture. After all my swearing and sliming about, losing blood and patience, I quickly get into a rhythm of paddling and sweating, fantasising about whatever food option I land on first.

When I get through to the highway, having paddled for several straight hours, which burns a different kind of candle, I rest on a discarded, filthy, incredibly comfortable faux leather couch. A half-hearted epiphany takes me by surprise – that I should sit on couches more because if feels good, really good. Allowing myself a moment of letting-go, which is rare when there's still so much do, I let the couch absorb my desire to be elsewhere. If I didn't know better, I'd put my head back and nap.

During my regular commute I stop at this same spot to leak close to the mouth of the river. Fallow deer were released here by one of settlers in the 1860s. When I first stopped here, I read this information on a placard glued to a large rock. I guess you could say I was familiar with this small pocket of highway land, but no, I am a transient, pure and simple, thinking about where I've come from and where I'm going, which is facilitated by the speed of a car. As I sink deeper into the couch, I spare a thought for the people who released the animals and consider they would have never imagined the havoc their decision would cause. Go back another thousand generations, and an elder standing by this abundant hunting ground would be horrified to hear of these modern-day events,

and see what I see now.

I feel like melting into the disgusting folds of faux-leather and calling it a day, but there are more pressing matters than my fatigue: leaking and food, in that order, because I'm busting. I think about overriding the whole business of getting the wetsuit and several layers of clothing off, for a moment of beautiful warmth and exceptional time management. Then think better of it. As I get up from the couch I flip again and realise a half-dip in the ocean at the end of the journey could somewhat atone for my actions. So I go, easily, barely worth all the thinking.

My reward for overriding the adult-built system of toilet-trained sensibilities is the sight of a well-known ute, towing a well-known caravan, pulling into the highway-side carpark. The caravan has large red letters saying 'DONUTS', and in smaller type, 'Coffee'. On the drop-side of the ute a tethered banner reads 'Apples'. God, who I don't believe in, works in mysterious ways. I'm struck by an almighty belief: I wouldn't usually consider donuts to be spiritual, but right now I believe there is no food more righteous. Never in my life have I emptied a kayak so quickly. Once, when a student was being horrifyingly stung by dozens of bluebottle jellyfish tentacles, the first-aid kit took infinitely more time for me to find than my $20 note in this moment. Trying to keep a lid on my excitement, I offer to help donut man set up his trailer by lowering the jockey wheel, chocking the wheels or turning on the gas. He takes his time, gliding about the place on much the same kind of autopilot as my newly rebooted leaking system. I finally order six jam donuts from the man, who takes about eight minutes to produce the goods, the longest eight minutes of my life. I wash down the goo with a cup of coffee and an apple, which is the best food and drink I've ever had.

I return to my obscenely dirty kayak full of sticks and barbs and break through to the sea three minutes later. Glassy, swirling green water and an unbroken hedge of white mangroves on my right guide me into the small town of Tooradin. This 10-km section of Western Port is delightful and clean and smooth, everything the river/canal was not. I know that Western Port has its own issues with sea-grass health, coastal ecology, bank erosion and pollution of all types, but with my belly full of donuts and needing to find a campsite before dark, I punch out the distance in a high cadence of positivity. Other than feeling my teeth rot, life is on the up, and I'm able to properly use the boat I've hardly paddled for three days.

There are many wonderful things about a kayak, and one of them is their ability to travel in shallow water, especially this flat-bottomed beauty with a draft that's largely dependent on how much I eat. In most other vessels I'd have had to head offshore to deeper water in order to transit, but the flat-bottomed kayaker can skim along relatively unscathed in one foot of water, which I do now, following small wave trains between crops of mangrove. I make camp on a small slice of grass next to the town's launching ramp and treat myself to a shower, which is only just hot enough, in the lightless toilet block. Re-dressing is to apply every layer of clothing I've bought with me. A heady smell of cow shit, sea and sweat emanates from me as I stew myself back to warmth. I imagine that, to others, such a smell is simply bad – not a sum of such interesting parts. I hustle to the small supermarket before it closes, wary of others, and purchase a small loaf of dense fruit bread, marked-down avocados and a giant chocolate bar. The rule of thumb for choosing mid-trip food purchases is based on how much I salivate when perusing the aisles, although I find I mostly loiter near the super-calorific food by default of being in energy deficit. If juices start to flow

when I’m in front of condensed milk and pumpernickel bread, then boom, I have myself a suspect sandwich combination with enough calories to lapse me into a coma.

Scoffing down a large bowl of wedges from the pub, I finish myself off with a muesli bar and four escapee dates found in the company of spare lip balm from the bottom of a drybag. Having completely emptied the tank, I fall asleep as though I’ve been clocked over the head with a bat.

Day 4

Today I will get to work, come hell or high water. As luck has it, high water is a few hours after dawn, meaning I can take the shortest possible route to Watsons Creek across the north-west corner of the tidal, shallow fringes of Western Port, breaking on a few of the islands along the way to leak and stretch. It's during this pleasing chunk of my commute, skirting around channel markers, observing sea life, gliding and twisting, that optimism returns in full force. Sea views tend to do that, which is why the most expensive real estate in the world is built on coastlines, as we look out on magnificent expanses to diminish our earthly problems. For me, the sea provides a break from everything that wasn't supposed to be in the river, which seemed like everything, including myself.

Low-lying shoreline that rims the mostly vegetated banks to the north of me is in fact the watery edge of a wide floodplain that was inundated from the sky and sea every so often, making it a marshy, silty extension of Western Port, and not the farmland it is now. Big rain events and the odd lunar anomaly make for interesting commutes through such land. You see everything at a soaked, banked, contained threshold. With the radio off, you can almost hear the locals holding their breath when you transit through their towns, holding on for a break in the weather or a smaller moon.

I know a lot of people around the flats of my commute. Not as well as I know the hilly people where I grew up, but enough to know they grow lots of vegetables, and cop the full force of wintery blasts from onshore winds. Like us who live in the denuded land, overlooking foothills, people in the flats live among pubic-hair remnants of bush. We're all good enough people, going about our business among norms handed down to us. I often think of what my commute would look like if my ute and I flew back in time and took a magical transit across the same lands. I know the Boonwurrung people of the Kooweerup flats are heartbroken.

For now, though, I'm not thinking about this place being good-before and bad-after because I'm too busy wondering where the hell Watsons Creek is. After passing close to the silty heads of China Bay, I stop on Chinaman Island for a few slices of fruit bread. As with any prolonged stop after a constant state of movement, especially when surrounded by a panorama of seascape that makes me feel small, I gain a certain sense of clarity because my eyes and body can cross-check the world's bits and pieces near and far long enough to interpret where the heck I am. At least, that's what I think by the time I'm on slice number two.

Navigating in a flat world without proper charts or topographic maps makes it incredibly hard to decipher what's what. I do have one, printed-out, A3 Google image shoved into the high zippered pocket of my cag, but it's a shoddy representation of what I need. Given my intended direction offers nothing tangible to lock onto as a known fixed point (telecom tower, treetops, distant hills, etc.), I need maps and charts to show where I've come from as much as where I'm going. South of me are great white chunks in the form of an oil refinery, dark shapes with the sharp points of shipping cranes, and the white, sandy smears of beaches. Various channel markers caked in bird crap that looks like melted ice cream, sporting triangles and colours and numbers, direct boat traffic north–south. East, where I've come from, offers subtle headlands, high points and a pixelated shoreline dotted with sheds on a large farm or it could be a town. Knowing one or two things for sure in any one direction offers me angulation, as I draw a line between that known thing and my known, fixed location. Knowing one or two things for sure in another direction offers me bi-angulation, as I make another line between me and those things.

Triangulation involves drawing three lines between you and the known world, placing you in the crosshairs of those lines. If you've weighed up the world well enough the lines come together at your known location, placing your muddy, cold feet on the juncture. If your crossed lines create a triangle the size of a small American state, then you best get your specs out and re-evaluate. Large white chunks you thought were oil tanks are in fact a set of letterboxes at a beachside nursing home and the farm sheds turn out to be a moving ship. All of this is abstract and useless of course without a map, chart, something straight (preferably a ruler), pen and pencil. To put a number from a magnetic bearing to such an act, add a compass. Without such tools, this whole wonderful business of locating yourself with a set of eyeballs and a few key tools of human ingenuity, you're left to your own devices, a shitty photo and the sun.

Looking for a small creek mouth exiting mangroves within a smudged 3–5-km chunk of shoreline is like trying to make out the individual eyebrow hairs on someone with a huge fringe who's sitting on the other side of the room. Scanning, squinting, scanning again, scratching my ear, walking up the muddy beach to change the angle slightly, makes me realise I can't see anything in particular, not one defining feature other than a dense middle-distance swath of green. Behind the mangrove line are gum trees, but they're far enough away to be as confused as smog, or smoke. I'm not lost, but I have no idea where I'm going.

I like these moments, because as I finish my break and re-enter the small cockpit of the kayak, a homely little place that's becoming more sea than land,

filled with sand and seaweed and fragments of shell, I sense I'm either going to find Watsons Creek and pull off this commute, or get horribly lost in a warren of mangroves and have to retreat to where I've come during the next high tide, which is at dusk. Half a map and a compass at this point would make things positively easy. Yet every stroke I take towards finding a place I can't see and I'm yet to feel out, adding to the potential of making the day truly hard, makes me feel equal measures of tension and enticement.

After an hour of high-cadence pulling towards a rough west-north-west bearing, multiple openings appear in the mangroves. Poor decision-making at this point would be to charge up a break in the trees thinking I was heading up Watsons Creek but instead find that I've paddled up an uncanny break in the vegetation, or a sliver of water that is not the outfall of Watsons Creek at all, shanking me in a slightly different direction that gently but certainly takes me five, then ten, then 20 degrees off course. Such a cockup would be far from fatal, perhaps even interesting, but it would likely add six to eight hours of toil, and draw blood on my temple from all the scratching as I try to figure out why all the left turns are not quite right. The worst decision would be to turn myself around entirely, taking multiple wrong approaches through an untrackable pathway in dwindling daylight and ending up spending the night in a mile-wide underbelly of dark green, muddy, flooded treescape.

The closer I get to the wide swathe of mangroves, the horizon disappears. Faraway gum trees, which are a sure sign of land life, blot from view as I'm swallowed by the fringe of Australia. Exaggerating things, the midday sun takes a leave of absence, disguised behind multiple layers of edgeless clouds. I find myself saying sweet, back-patting affirmations, jockeying along the thought that I've gone beyond the point of return, so I head faithfully in the vague direction of work.

I choose the left of three significant gaps. The tide is well against me at this stage, forcing the issue as we go our separate ways. The outpouring water of an ebb tide is what would happen if a very large hand pulled out a very large plug in a bathtub made for a continent-sized man. A highly tensioned, uncompromising sinkhole of gravity has been released, making the physics of water urgent. Mud starts to show where water was moments ago, turning an Aquarius world into an earthly one at an alarming pace. Wet becomes damp, leaving me amid waist-deep mud, which forces me to be neither kayaker nor walker. You become a primordial try-hard stuck between one world and another without the tools or skills to survive there.

Hearing the high-pitched rev of an outboard motor surprises me because I haven't heard human-made sounds for hours. In-out noise gives the impression

of twisting and turning, likely by tracing the same seam of navigable water as me. I tuck between branches as the noise approaches. Occupied by two men in blue-checked shirts, a 10-foot tinny zippers past. Heads swivel as our paths cross, the men having picked out my red cag and red kayak as a smudge in their peripherals. We don't have time to acknowledge each other in the blur. If I was any deeper in the foliage, I would have gone unseen, which makes me wish I had been, given they've burst my bubble. In some way them not knowing I am here would have made my presence seem a little more dicey. But as their wake crinkles me into the arms of the thick and bendy trees, I know they've delivered the message that I'm on the right path.

After 20 minutes of hard paddling against the grain, the mangrove alley tightens to the width of my paddle. I hit a fridge-sized beach and see where the tinny has launched. Much like a croc slide, the underside of the boat has made a black smear in the grey sand, cutting the tiny half-moon cove into two halves. Scuff marks chew at the sand where the men have loaded their boat, decanting their stuff from an old wheelbarrow that sits in wait for the return trip. I can't see much beyond an immediate band of velvety paddock, nibbled to the likes of a golf green by wallabies and roos. Gum trees are instantly everywhere, backdropping the strip of green, and the gated, poorly fenced paddock seems like a failed farm given back to the native animal population. Serrated tussock, an introduced grass pleasing to the eye, makes me feel instantly back in the land of fishers, farmers and hunters. So much about this secretive, perhaps private backwater appeals to me because it seems so personal, as if the men own this beach in a country where the coast can't be sold.

Three minutes past the small launching place I run out of paddle-able water, which is bad, but good timing, because I need to eat. Knowing I have a clearly defined groove of earth to follow until dusk makes me feel chuffed, but the lack of water means masticating twice as slow trying to eke every ounce of calorie from my food. My kayak commute goes back to dragging a boat next to the suggestion of water. As I chew slowly, making the second-last handful of food last as long as possible, I convince myself that today will end in a key-turn at work, and a destination where I can stop, instead of having to make camp. Returning to Helen's apartment in Melbourne for a large bowl of something thick and hot and five minutes of conversation is a hard vision to shake. But knowing what lies between me and work, which isn't a lot, other than a rude direction and a rough estimate of distance, means I must at least entertain the idea of spending another night out. The adventure of being out longer than you've planned is an awakening of sorts because you have to burn longer and hotter to get the job done. Self-talk during such a stage is important to work

through your desire to be elsewhere, especially when the spectre of a hungry, dirty man converting once again his last allotment of daily energy to finding a human-sized hollow to hide, and sleep, is actually you.

After two hours of doing battle with my old friend the blackberry, then its cousin the wild rose, and a bunch of sword grass that makes a venetian blind out of my wetsuit, I make my way out of coastal scrublands into an endless chequerboard of small, boxed-up paddocks with skittish horses, horse crap, and electrified fencing. Horses and I exchange sniffs as I pass momentarily through their enclosures, and I talk to them as I do with people on a train, a mostly one-way conversation in my head.

After 44 hours of faithfully following a place of water, taking up the daylight hours of four days, I leave Watsons Creek because the creek is no more. All that remains of the sick little waterway is a triangular headwater the size of a baseball field. A wise landowner has planted out the creek line with a dozen or so varieties of native plants, all of which are bursting with health from their nursery guards. It feels nice to see the sick little waterway getting a health kick, and I thank the owners as silently as I talk to their horse.

I dome across a few more horsy paddocks, entering another watershed sloping west. I feel the shift in my bum and legs, based on simple physics of an increased load. No longer following a natural easement of least resistance made by water, I'm instead contouring and traversing across folds of land. Piloted by my read of the farmscape, I know I've got to aim about 45 degrees to the right of the sun in a crude north-west direction in whatever way I can make work. Being continually hemmed in by smaller properties, dogs, bigger fences, more signs, cameras and people, I choose the smallest roads leading in roughly the right direction. I think of the nearest highway because I can hear it, the south-westerly wind bringing with it the sound of commuters heading home from the city. Toil is now land-based and linear, predictable, if a little hodge-podge, as I go from one straight line to the next, looking at my feet. I stop at a petrol station for water, which is a unique drive-through experience, towing a kayak, wearing in a wetsuit, filling up from a tap between bowsers. Five minutes later, I pick out a well-preserved wrench from the well-pressed shoulder of a road. Distractions no longer revolve around paddling.

Dragging along the gravel shoulder of a road I drive multiple times a week, I start to feel the full weight of the kayak. Stopping for a break does that – it makes you feel every beaten-up piece of yourself all over again when you get going. Sluggish reboots often get overrun with fantasy of some kind, food or wild sex for example, and before you know it, the feeling of weight and pressure and repetition normalise and the job goes on. But not this time. I feel perhaps

that my long-range tanks are sputtering, and that I'm all of a sudden going to seize up and come to a grinding halt. I lean a little harder against the towline and push on, ganging up on myself. It doesn't work so I stop, swear and sit on a perfectly graded chunk of roadside at stool height to talk myself around. Miffed that my demise is so obvious and simple, I entertain the idea of pulling into a close-by school (water, shelter, no real owner) and spend one last night out to summon up strength for the new day.

As I look off towards the school, I follow the line of my kayak. I notice, and I have to look again to confirm, that the drag mark is wider than I'd expect, and tilled, as if a human-sized grader had made a pass. Much like taking off your pants after you've slipped with a sharp knife and cut cleanly and neatly through to your leg, knowing damn well you're about to reveal a nasty big gash, I apprehensively turn over the kayak to see a hand-width seam of kayak has completely worn through. The wound has cavitated, taking on a wet slurry of roadside gravel, weighing about 5 kg. Not only have I been dragging a bucketful of sand and rock, I've been dragging along a kayak with a hull cut into the shape of a grader blade.

'Nice one Beau, you dick,' I say to myself, relieved, yet feeling genuinely bad for the kayak, knowing that my final stanza of dragging had been the killer blow to a perfectly good vessel. I can fix the problem, but not here and not now. Given the large hole is behind the seat, meaning it's off-centre, my one solution is to turn the kayak around and drag from the stern, meaning the hole will be floating just above ground level. I'll also shorten the leash slightly to give the kayak a bit more angle behind me.

Emptying the kayak of rubble feels as good as eating again. I hook up and drag the remaining 4.5 km to work via the softest-looking nature strips on offer, and no one stops me when I cross through the university grounds on a beeline to my office past the library where students study. Through automatic doors set off by a late-leaving colleague, and upstairs to the fourth floor of the sixties, neat, industrial building, I arrive at my office 82 hours after leaving home. I sit at my desk in my filthy clobber drinking milk from the carton, dead tired and deeply satisfied.

Showered, fed, wired on coffee to get me home in one piece, I drive home that night (having left my car at work inanticipation of this journey) and take in whatever middle ground the old ute's yellowing headlights pick up. I'm in no rush. Leaving the cinema after watching *The Revenant* was much the same feeling, which was distinct enough and powerful enough to remember, which was transitioning from the bombastic storytelling of a big-screen cinema into the think-tank capsule of the car. Only this is less abstract and otherworldly. I swear

I can smell the mud from the Tarago, or the two-stroke mist of the tinny, or the friendly blend of tuna and beans as I pass the relevant places. My mind's eye is full, and whatever I think seems remarkably real.

The 68-minute drive home is astonishingly life-affirming. Trying to give blood the following day hammers home the point, as I'm turned away with vital signs that are more those of a dead man than an alive one. I'm kindly and firmly told to head straight to my GP, or anyone who can look into my low iron, high blood pressure and a heart rate of 38. I tell the nurses that I've just paddled to work, which they think is novel, before they again kindly implore me to get help. 'Thanks, ladies,' I say. 'I hope the next bloke who walks through the door has better blood!' I smile as I walk into the dim light of day, knowing that my life-affirming activity has only made me less than human for a day or so, and I'm fine with that.

CHAPTER 3:
RUN

Train people

Many kids are train people. Small humans quickly figure out that trains are aspirational in that you can't really own one, and when they're given their first toy train, kids find themselves with a magical artefact representing freedom, wealth and envy. Anything that remotely resembles a train and its line is a place to practise: sugar sachets chugged neatly along the rim of a coffee table or a speedy tampon swooshed around the exciting arch of a handbag strap. Then something happens and you hit a time in life, likely around the age of 39, when you realise you're either a train person or a non-train person. You go in one of two directions: 1) you have a curious attraction to the Siri-type voice telling you to mind the gap, which can be a sexual innuendo if you think hard enough about it, which means you're not a train person, or 2) while still attracted to train-Siri, you know the average gap between train and station depends on the kind of train you're on (which you know), and if platform works have taken place at the station to lessen the gap (which you also know). This means you're a train person.

Train people often have an unnervingly intimate knowledge of how, when and why parallel steel lines opened up continents like a sharp knife opens up a rockmelon. Locomotives, loud and heavy, temperamental bastards fired along by paw-handed men with greasy overalls and beards, are usually part of the romance. Besotted by details, and completely enamoured by all the steel and power and frontier places trains sliced into, train people are historians.

While my lack of personal neatness could be compared to one of those ruddy-faced engineers who wash their hands once a week, I'm not a train person, yet I've still known about the closed-off section of railway from Warragul to Noojee my whole life. I wouldn't consider my acknowledgement of the line as concrete knowledge, more a fable, on par with 'This town was settled in 1887 by a man named such'n'such.' Like so many places around the world that changed the instant someone had the idea to put a train line in, bringing with it everything the Western world stood for, my knowledge of the old train line, or lack of it, got watered down with all the other bits and pieces of history I should have learned

and didn’t.

Instead, perm-haired schoolteachers rolled out history as a tale of pyramids and great walls, US presidents, Burke and Wills, and the world wars. Trains made an appearance, much like a porter does at a hotel, as a transport initiative that underpins bigger entities. I likely had childish conversations with Mum and Dad about the old train line when I was a junior redhead, but I frankly don’t remember anything about life at that age. Not really. Memories didn’t stick for me until I reached ten or so. It was about that time I tracked along a section of the railway to go fishing. I remember the day vividly because I was far enough from home to make me nervous, shuffling along under a false sense of bravado because my fishing mate was older than me, and fearless. It occurred to me that the flat and gently curved bush track we were walking on was likely an old train line. Fishing mate heard me thinking, answering my unsaid observation with, ‘This is an old train line. Dunno when it was, but it was.’ Train lines that no longer have tracks on them look awfully suspicious, even to kids.

I don’t recall thinking of the line again for a handful of years, not seriously, and not for what it was: a distinct line of human travel, 43 km in length, that joined together two major places, and seven towns between. Actually, it was because of the line that the towns became towns, and newly minted colonials moved into new space with their axes and teacups.

If I roll out an old map of the area I now live in – and it must be an old map, as new maps show nothing of the train line – I would see that the line transects every major town that’s had something to do with my formative life. It sweeps by schools where I learned to write, past trees in front yards where I stole fruit, and across sports grounds that taught me how to lose.

It makes sense that train lines are nearly always represented on a map as a series of broken dashes, because we don’t actually engage with the line of a train as you would a hiking trail or a road. Only the train driver sees the tracks, and where it goes. Maps in our heads and in our stories maybe lack the in-between because our view of trains is from the inside of our carriage, or out the window, never out front.

Perhaps the term ‘adulthood’ refers to a state of mind that acknowledges the world doesn’t revolve around our internal sense of the universe. In my part of the world, a complex and incredibly long history unfolded before Europeans came along. All of a sudden, if you roll up your sleeves, you go in search of a better history. Off you go to supplement what Misses and Misters taught you at primary school.

It’s like bread. Poor knowledge is cheap white bread that’s part-baked somewhere, frozen, shipped then finish-baked (warmed up) and sold as fresh

bread. Such bread is staggeringly cheap and tastes pretty good. Better knowledge is brown bread that you've mixed and kneaded, baked in your own oven, before licking the spoon clean of dough and eating the bread hot, ripped apart, with a crude slab of butter melting on top. Your own bread tastes better, is healthier and you know more about its constitution than that of the fluffy white stuff. After falling on my face one day while running in the vicinity of the old train line, a line that had had a white-bread history to me, I decided to construct a brown-bread version of the old track.

White-bread history

Tripping while trail running is actually not all that common. When running across the Australian Alps, I did my fair share of tripping, but most of it was the psychedelic kind, where you have a three-way conversation with a cloud and an overripe peach who are wrestling, apparently, in your backpack. The literal form of tripping, via rock, stick, snake-stick, or leaf, only has me eating dirt a few times a year. Recently, the smallest stick in the forest had me on my face – actually, the side of my face – about 30 minutes out from the trailhead on a glorious piece of single-track. Dirt rammed in my left ear and a granulated assortment of forest-floor material infiltrated my shorts, along with small chunks of my own skin. Rattled, and annoyed at the liner of my shorts for holding and not keeping out such contraband, I felt a little creepy as I violated myself, half nude in the bush, hands in my business trying to remedy the situation. With my pride and my body a little wounded, I headed for the old railway line so I could shuffle back to the car to clean myself up. I needed to turn my foot–eye coordination off and on again, like the universal fix for a dicky computer, as I clearly wasn't working. Granted, I was in need of a banana, so I was operating on low power, but either way, I retreated to flatter surface.

I popped onto a clear section of the line, sweaty and bloody, cantering to a trot, and took in the massive old chunks of old bridge by the trailside. I slowed to a walk, taking in the pretty scene. Walking, I consider, is a signal I'm growing older, less in a hurry, wanting to be in one spot for longer. It was as if I was maturing into adulthood at that very moment.

Ambling along, slowing with my heart rate, I took in the sounds of the bush. I noticed how easy things were from the vantage point of a railway line, with no dips or swales, nothing high or low, left or right. I thought about this place when I'd been fishing as a kid, 30 years earlier. Everything was graded, creeks and gullies backfilled using dirt and rock from sections of line that cut through the hills.

With the landscape under my feet devoid of folds, I don't keep an eye on the uncivilised face of the world – my feet romping along from rock to stick to flat spot – meaning I look around. I articulated in that moment what I had always known; why flat running, or flat anything, doesn't interest me, and why train lines make for a particular kind of walking.

I'm attracted to running in the bush as an adult because I feel that at any moment I could be taken down by a rock, stick or wombat. It's a false pretence in some regard since falling on my face, as I've said, rarely happens, but the

prospect means I move through the world with a wonderful sense of immediacy and urgency. This makes me present in the moment, the kind of state people advocate as being mindful while still. I can never, or at least have never tried beyond a passing go, to be mindful while not moving. It doesn't work for me, or I don't really care to try because I have a perfectly good form of Zen.

Yet lo and behold, going slightly against my native belief that running beats walking as a way of feeling out the world, my slowed footfalls along the old train line, something I have never really done (I'd usually be running in the adjacent forest) enticed a hybrid form of moving and thinking. Thinking at much the same pace as the watery movement of the tree canopy or a blue lick of smoke from a distant farmhouse chimney turning to white, was interesting, informative and pleasant, even nice. Change was afoot because I wasn't looking at them, and instead glancing left, right, up and even behind.

What I was seeing and being affected by in my sideways outlook was what thousands of people one hundred years before me had seen: bush and tree trunks and depth of scale where creeks led off into folded dens of fern and tea tree. Smells were bombastic, far greater than I would have perceived with the huffing of a runner, which tends to limit the smellability of the world. An old train with the windows down was much the same exposure and view of the world as what I was seeing now.

Righto, I thought, herein lies a project. Knowing the start and finish points of the old line, Warragul being a current-day train station and Noojee sporting a recently made replica station, with several chunks of rail trail in between, I thought, 'Why don't I stitch the old line back together, on foot, end to end, in one long run?'

'Good idea, mate,' I said aloud, to no one, following up with, 'I'll dress like a 1950s train driver and carry a shovel to whack blackberries. I hate blackberries.' I then moved to an internal monologue to confirm minor details.

Over tea, which is most often the first thing I do when entering the house after any kind of vacancy, in about 200 words I wrote up the idea to be a short film and a run. After the concept is penned I do as little prep as possible, which is harder than it sounds. Humans always seem in search of more information because more information makes things easier. This has made us mind-bendingly advanced animals. But I've come to see easy googling as the antithesis of innovation and invention, likely pegging us back in the evolutionary stakes, because: 1) it obliterates curiosity, which is a foundation for fun, and cockups; 2) having oodles of information makes me feel like I'm about to roll out a script by the time I get to the start line, and I'm not an actor; and 3) getting to the point of something being easy means truckloads of energy has been spent

gathering and scheming, and is potentially a critical waste of a lifetime if you consider mortal life to be all about bang-for-buck.

Let's say I spend ten hours on research and preparation for this all-day project, and that ten hours of preparation makes my all-day run a seamless operation conducted over eight hours, which has me home for dinner. My argument against such preparation is that not doing it means things won't run seamlessly, riddled with unknowns and almost certain cockups, yet it would still likely get done in ten hours. My lifetime comes out with a credit of eight hours, I have dinner at the pub instead, and a better story because of it. A mindset of adaptability means I will have a funnier, surprising and perfectly challenging experience, because there's only so much fixing and shifting you can do when you're living within the task.

My Africa trip encouraged me to unlearn the habits of information overload. Two years of preparations went mostly out the door as soon as I landed on the giant continent. It turns out the key was sponging up the intricacies of a place with an entirely different set of rules instigated by people with an entirely similar set of humanisms. While catching a bus might be different in the way you get on, pay for and get off, the bus driver has a distinctly similar set of attributes to her Manhattan counterpart. In the same way you can read people with some time and attention, you can read the landscape. Heading in as many different directions as I needed to and trusting the first, second or third person I asked about any given thing was the main way that information flowed into the life force of that long expedition. People trumped maps, guidebooks and the internet, allowing me to be informed, just enough. A lack of knowledge loads up the venture with even doses of the unknown, which works well for me, and anxiety, which seems bad but is actually useful to an adventurer.

My one piece of homework for the train-line walk was a high-scale flyover on Google Earth, though I had to stop myself from zooming in too close, which was easy enough given the sputtering internet at my place. Based on this satellite quilt, there looked to be about 32 farms and countless suburban homes on the old line.

As I plan to do my best to run the original line, I will have to zigzag through the fringe of Warragul, knowing it's unlikely I'd get all landowners on board so I go ahead without many of them knowing, thinking I can ask for forgiveness instead of permission. I leave my homework at that and set a date.

An unseasonal April Day

Helen and I got married in April on a day of sideways rain and wind that blew the tin off my half-finished wood shed, which I'm told is a sign of good luck. In truth, we'd hoped for warm and sunny. Lots of people in Australia get married in April because it's a wafty time of year when leaves flit about, there's no chance of a 40-degree day that burns holes in the road and only a slim chance of a 30-degree day, and it's cheaper than November and March. April wedding guests can be half in, half out of the sun while they wear sun-smart additions to their costume.

All these spot-on conditions for an April wedding also apply to an all-day run, so I locked in 14 April, which is my wedding anniversary. If past experience was anything to go by, the day would be either the first day of a harsh winter or a throwback from the middle of summer. Bugger me if the day I picked was going to be one of those 30-degree, not-a-breath-of-wind days. The fact that there were plenty of muddy, flowless creeks and cows still producing a restricted supply of milk in the area meant the run would involve flies, a lot more sweat and a few more freckles.

Warragul station limps along nowadays as a supporting cast member to a town based around cars, supermarkets and cafés. Originally a weatherboard-clad building with a ballroom and supply sheds, it was rebuilt in classic red brick at the start of the 20th century when trains still had the leading role and settlers were arriving in droves to live among the clearings of giant trees grown in thick dirt. When even the biggest trees, some of the biggest in the world, were found north of Warragul, the rolling foothills of Mt Baw Baw (said 'Bore Bore', based on the Gunaikurnai name 'Bo Bo') proved a tantalising prospect for new settlers and a new branch line. Surveyed and built running to Neerim South in 1892, the line finally made it all the way to the end of Noojee Valley in 1919 via seven massive bridges.

I've caught the current train running between Melbourne and Warragul an awful lot, and in fact I like train trips because of travelling this very line as a boy, going between city and country, between Mum and Dad. Sharing time and air with a particular bandwidth of the population, running east–west through familiar farmlands and people's backyards, became a background to my emerging independence as a teenager. Taking me between split parents, on school excursions, for work, to sporting events, to bumbling first and horrible last dates, and eventually to overseas expeditions, the line has been a consistent form of transportation in my life. I once ran from an adjacent town to catch an

express train to Melbourne. Cutting it fine, I sprinted the last 100 m to make it. It turns out I'd missed the Melbourne train and hopped on the train going in the direction I'd come from. I stayed on, beaten, getting off where I'd started two hours earlier.

As I'm my own train today, there's less chance of going the wrong way, and I've settled on leaving Warragul station at 6:32 am, mimicking the first daily train that serviced the line for 65 years. I know about the 6:32 because I was told about it, without warning, a few weeks before the intended run. To be clear, I did not source out this titbit of information (I had received 50 cents' change after buying a $4.50 jar of homemade pickles from a country market that backs onto the old train line. The vendor had asked me something like, 'Have you seen a lot of the old line?', to which I answered, 'Not as much as I'd like. But I'm about to run it.' From out of nowhere a manly train person appeared and told me about the daily train schedule. I cannot tell you if the train person was correct about the train schedule because I've since looked, and can't find one).

As myself and film crew of Mitch, Chris and Brett pull into the new railway precinct carpark, a large slab of asphalt covering what was, for a hundred years, a wide stabling yard of lines, sheds, and piles of rock, I tell the lads about my fabled run that had me back where I started. I laugh as I recount my disbelief when the train pulled off in the other direction. There isn't a lot of love from the others for my perkiness at such an hour, which is often the case for early morning starts in the company of black-dressed men with beards. Film types are rarely morning people; they're creatures of caffeine and late nights, not birdsong and tea as the sun comes up.

Besides, I'm the one going on an all-day treasure hunt, so there might be different levels of dopamine going through our veins. I find a similar level of morning perk in the friendly stationmaster, who's an obvious early riser, with his neat hair and sharp whiskers. He informs me that 'No trains are running today. Services are being replaced by road coach.'

'Bloody terrific,' I reply. 'I can match that – I'm also not a train, and will be replacing the last train that ran to Noojee 61 years ago. I'm gonna run it.'

'Fair enough, mate,' he says. And that was that. I take my shovel to the end of the platform, jump onto the tracks and head north. Moments before my feet hit the fist-sized chunks of bluestone between railway sleepers, I hear the stationmaster announce over the loudspeaker, 'Service heading to Noojee in the form of one man.' How bloody fantastic, I think. Only in Australia would an unofficial nod of approval come from an official. I crack on with the first strides of the day, buoyed by the words of a train person.

Getting out, or in

Every time I drive from the city to where I live in the country, there is a moment in the journey where I exit the multilane highway in a perfect arch, slowing to a T-intersection that heads off onto a small country road. Everything industrial and fast-paced seems to instantly slow down and simplify in that moment. I feel the transition every time. Home is then 15 minutes away, up a small road with bends and cracked edges, where overhanging trees make it hard to make out water from shade or roadkill. I tend to take stock of things every time I re-enter home range. I count animals and inspect farmers' sheds, wondering when or if the owners have seen that their east-facing hayshed has two sheets of iron missing on the southern wall. I watch trees grow and die, notice weeds that colour the paddocks in different unnatural shades every other month, responding to rain and the tilt of the Earth. It's the best part of the journey as I pinball through the moving parts of my district, navigating towards the bells and whistles of home.

Today I imagine that moment of gearing down as I exit the highway, moving me from one kind of life to another, symbolised by the satisfying arch of the off-ramp, evokes a similar feeling to train users when the Noojee train used to swing left from the main trunk, starting its weave towards the farming hamlets of West Gippsland.

I'm fruity enough to realise that my excitement as a 39-year-old is perhaps a little immature, but I can't help but feel that backyard stunts like running the old line tap me into the adventurers' psyche as much as a long sea-kayak crossing with no sight of land. Or as much as a multi-pitch alpine ascent with ropes and bivouacs, defying gravity using bolts the size of your little finger and webbing a million times stronger than a spider's web. The scale of land and sea is the exaggerated backdrop for the kayaker and climber; cars beneath your porta-ledge become the size of ants, and a distant blip of a lighthouse as seen from the seat of a sea kayak is so far away you can see the curvature of the earth around it.

Photos of such ascents and crossings are on the front covers of magazines and provide clickbait for socials. They tend to typify adventurous envy for the exotic, spectacular, technical, otherworldly: 'Gee, I'd love to do that.' I've done many high and wide adventures, occasionally inspired by others, and have come to love the human–ant scale as I pit myself against a line on a map. Bobbing about in the ocean when things go wrong or hanging by a fingernail on a crumbling piece of cliff face have a distant appeal, but my current situation reduces the imminence of drowning, sharks eating me, or death on impact when I fall.

At worst I'll be accosted by a landowner as I cross through their land, or I'll

get my ear snagged by a wayward blackberry bush. My emerging interpretation of adventure removes loss of life when things go wrong, but I've maintained the vital ingredients of excitement and risk by keeping myself in the dark about expected outcomes. Unknowingness boils up different types of challenge, reward and physical demands, which allows things to become fun and even ridiculous.

Adventure to me is not about visualising a result, as would an athlete before they throw, hit or jump, although this certainly helps to get the job done sometimes. What I hope to find is only a projection, the end result of distance versus time countered with a list of potential deal-breakers like being arrested or shot, mixed with the constants of muesli bars and sunscreen. The rest, which is the reality of the adventure, must be unknown. I suppose this is always the case for kinaesthetic types, as no one *really* knows what making the clutch shot feels like, but I presume athletes think they do, so they chase it with obsession and loathing. Herein lies the difference. I chase the end by taming my imagination, and doing only what's required to start, shutting down fantasy and doubt. Better yet, it's often only when I'm facedown in the dirt and halfway to where I think I'm going when I give in to the reality of what I'm doing.

Now that I'm mortgaged, loved up, domesticated, and know that I was once a lot more impulsive and a lot more fun, I also know that my 39-year-old legs have done some serious mileage, so they can actually do what my younger self only dreamed of.

12 minutes in

I encounter a house built squarely across the old tracks. Remarkably, almost 2 km through town, this is the first obstruction since starting. To get here I've followed a street, which was previously the line, which was before that a rich vein of creek-side dirt growing some of the biggest trees the colonials had likely ever seen. After a roundabout and petrol station I came onto an awkward little rectangle park via a gravel path – still following the line – through sickly willows past a sports ground that has remnants of the diverted creek on the outer edge of its boundary. The whole scene was likely a marsh, now drained and pushed up as a playing field. I tracked along the back fences of a dozen homes, all unimpeded, all once upon a time a train line. Things made sense as the land gently rose either side of me as I shuffled along a nearly dead-flat section of earth, creek-side being the meandering path of least resistance and a perfect place to build a train line.

I drift up the driveway of the small home. I see, quite clearly, that the fences either side of the property are the edges of railway line easement, a typically 15-metre slice of land measuring 7.6 m each side of the centre line of the track. The ridgeline of the roof is roughly central to the old railway. It feels completely wrong to travel further into the property. Windows and walls and fences hem me in the deeper I go. The feeling is one of my previously boundless freedom being reined in with each step, as if a hand weighs heavier on me the further I trespass. Retreating, I decide to go around, knowing that an intimidating church compound with high fences will be the next hurdle. It's too early in the day to ask a retiree or someone else's God for forgiveness.

I am constantly astounded by how far you can go on foot, especially when you don't stop. In no time, having circumvented several new houses on new streets that cross the old line, I'm on the edge of town, where the owners of prime farmland are being swindled by sockless developers driving around utes that never see dirt. Disused 50-cow dairies, which for a long time was a standard sized herd of milkers, cows fed on just enough land to keep mum-and-dad farming operations occupied from dawn to dusk, lie dormant and dying. Old tractors and farm implements are dotted about, left where they last broke, too expensive to fix and now a scratching post for bored horses. Pretty weeds as high as sheds grow between cracks in the concrete races that lead to milking stalls. These are now estate lands awaiting the glaciation of houses. Baw Baw Shire, with little, and in some cases no, communication with edge-of-town farm owners, has rezoned the land for housing, putting up their rates by 650 per cent

overnight, forcing the owners to sell up. This seems the inevitable outcome of population growth and urbanisation; Indigenous lands stolen to make towns and farms, then serviced by trains which are replaced by cars, and in turn more people building bigger houses with a cinema room and no backyard.

The line is easy to see here, following loyally to low ground, as did a surveyor on horseback 130 years earlier, before the line was mowed by cows and eventually used as a thoroughfare for four-wheeler motorbikes. A few remaining gums grow grandly along a mopped-up and pugged creek bed. Visible evidence of the gently sloped and pushed up earth of the line continues in a lovely arch that only railroads make, running directly into the back fence of a two-storey brick home. A Japanese maple grows on the fence line, rooted at the centre line of the old track. Such a scene is a stark reminder of one era overtaking another, with this ornamental tree growing in the yard of a suburban house so far from the train station it would have once been considered as part of another town. I peer over the fence and see that no evidence of the trainline exists in the backyard, the clearly marked section I'm standing on having been smoothed over. I wonder if the owners even know that their kitchen sink sits where a train rumbled through not all that long ago.

More suburbia, wider and fatter and more desolate than I thought existed in a town I thought I knew, buffers me until I finally hit the town limits, about 5 km from Warragul station. The line is clear again as it makes an obvious course northwards, running along a windrow of pine trees smattered with gums. Embodying a sense of Australian oddity, the gums' awkward limbs protrude and counter the symmetrical habit of the pines. Looking back to see if I'm being followed by an irate farmer, which is my first sense of being watched, I notice a brand-new cul-de-sac without a street sign that has fresh folds of dirt either side of newly cut driveways with no houses. I imagine the name of the street will be Oak Terrace or Sunny Drive, or some other wanky name without an ounce of authenticity.

Townland finishes and farmland starts. Tiny boxes with new homes built to the boundaries are replaced with larger boxes of every shape and size, divided by fencing of every kind, grazed and cropped into every colour of an artist's mixing board. Rounded-up grass is sickly yellow, irrigated sections are Kermit-green, and tilled paddocks are the colour of dried blood. I will cross this quilted landscape for the next 30 km. State bushlands will break up the boxes, but for the most part, I'm entering a naked landscape. I imagine I can be seen from verandas and roads as a lone figure with a shovel, looking for something, in a hurry. Knowing I'd be crossing though other people's property on and off for the rest of the day feels edgy, which for some reason seems about right.

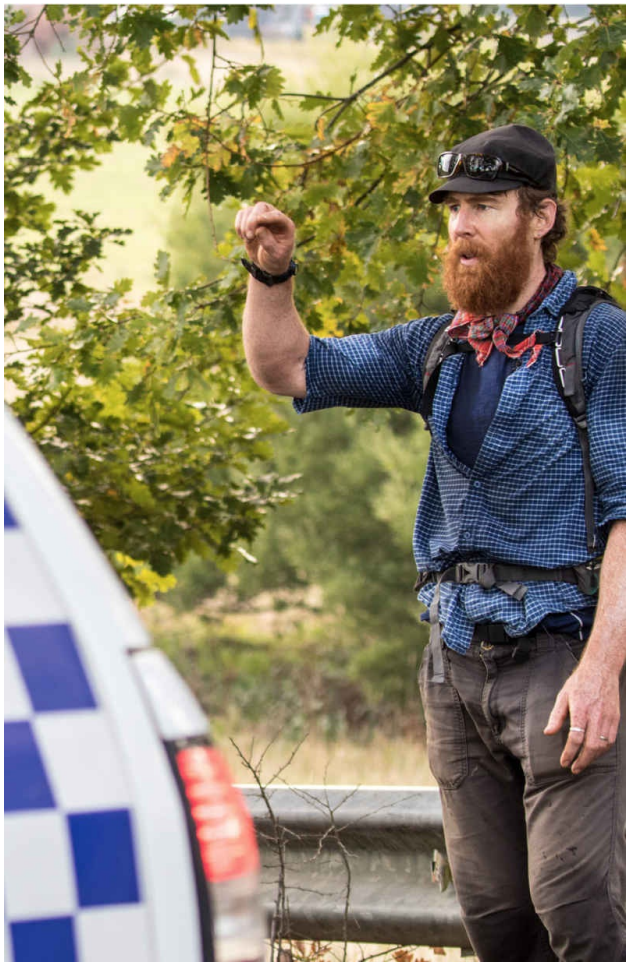
Lillico Station: police, 1.5 hours

Much like the prospect of being frisked at an airport, I don't mind the idea of doing something that gets the attention of authorities. Chatting to police officers in the heat of doing something a little off is a good chance to have a break, much like taking a leak, and a well-earned excuse to take stock of things over a conversation with someone other than yourself. In what must be a question-opener that police are trained to ask suspect people in Australia, Officer A, who is always partnered with Officer B, asks firmly, 'Mate, what are you doin'?'

As I take off my sunglasses and shuffle into a slice of shade (I knelt down next an officer once, to be shaded by them), I'll say what I'm doing in the simplest of terms, which is usually something a little unusual, possibly illegal, done with innocence. Officer B then says something along the lines of, 'You know you can't do that, mate?'

To which I say, 'Yeah, right. Well, I figured I'm not doing anyone any harm.'

Most of the time, I'm told to move on and avoid doing what I'm doing, which I agree to do, before I go on doing what I was doing. I get the sense that a lot of the time the stern then friendly police are not really sure what's illegal or not, especially when it comes to laws that are not often broken, or ones that are fringe, like those that prohibit paddling stormwater drains, sleeping in trees or dismantling an old bedframe on the median strip of a highway. Or, in this case, retracing an old train line on foot, shovel in hand, along a thin wedge of land the government once owned, and still might.



As clouds part and unseasonal heat starts to take effect, a welcome piece of shade greets me as I pop out onto one of the 20 road crossings I'd make that day. The film crew arrive in their cars, having followed me at right angles since the last crossing as I made my way across several farms. A police divisional van approaches from the direction of Warragul, roughly 10 km away. The car pulls up squarely alongside me. Officer A, who is behind the wheel, window down, informs me of the problem: 'Mate, what are you doin'? People are ringin' us about a man crossing their paddocks.'

I tell them I'm Beau from Jindivick, much like Bilbo Baggins says he's from Hobbiton. As I stand there drenched in sweat, as if I've run from town carrying a shovel, and enjoying the deep shade of a willow that grows firmly from the small remaining slice of pushed up railway, our conversation warms up. Mitch, Chris and Brett continue to film. As I've been accosted by police before, and all of us know that a rolling camera doesn't look like a rolling camera when you're not looking through a viewfinder or at a screen, cameras continue to roll.

'I'm running the old Warragul-to-Noojee railway line – retracing it. I reckon I might be the first person to do it since it closed down in 1958.'

‘Yeah, right,’ Officer B says. ‘How far is it?’

‘’Bout 43 kay, close to a marathon, which is kinda why I’m doing it.’

‘Geez,’ he responds.

‘What’s with the shovel?’ Officer A asks.

‘Well, a few sections coming up are pretty overgrown with blackberries and willows. I thought about carrying a machete, but reckoned you folks would have arrested me by now.’

‘Right,’ says, B, leaning towards the conversation from the passenger seat. ‘Well, at least you’re not crazy.’

I agree. We laugh.

I thank them, and they drive off.

Feeling a little relieved that I’m actually continuing, I dart across the next slab of green hillside like a hunted fox, as if the trained eyes of police, farmers and anyone else with a gun or a phone are onto me.

Bravington Station: boyhood turf, 2.5 hours

I imagine life for a landowner in Bagshot Row, Bag End, Hobbiton, would be much like life for one on Old Telegraph Road West, sometimes called Glencromie Road. Both Hobbiton and Drouin West are hinterlands of a green and rolling Shire where people have been getting lost since before tracks became roads. When one road gets split into chunks, disjointed by government brainwaves, bushfire or flood, the landscape is divided by twisted creeks and cow-flanked hills and the world becomes a blur to everyone but those who live there. Calling an ambulance for help here would entail giving the operator a mud-map of black stumps, potholes and funny-looking letterboxes, or otherwise telling them to head to the home of the oddball artist known for driving around a Rolls Royce picking up chook pellets and boxes of champagne. Gary Miles, my dad.

I know Old Telegraph Road West, with its black tarmac two tractors wide, better than any other road in the world. It's the road I was taken home on as a newborn, the first road I ran to the end and back, and it was the first road I knew well enough to know that I wanted to leave. As I encounter the raised and flat section of soil that suggests Bravington Station, the third stop of the old line which sits in the middle of a paddock at the end of Old Telegraph Road West, my boyhood road, I reflect that it was likely the first train station I ever set eyes on, although I didn't know it at the time.

All these years later, no longer sporting a helmet of orange hair, I enter the Bravington Station paddock, which turns quickly to thick bush, bush that I know intimately, including every inch of the 7-km stretch of train line that runs through the heart of it. This particular section of the old line is considered one of the steepest sections of railway in the state, or was. I know because a train person at my wife's work party told me in the lead-up to the run, as did another train person, perhaps tipped off by the woman who sold me pickles, who shoved a note under the front door of my house saying something similar. An email landing in my inbox from another train person confirmed the fact from the first two train people. Word had gotten out, and here I was running a line that a lot of people knew more about than me. At least, they knew about it factually. My currency for this patch of world is experiential, gained over countless runs on every scrap of runnable terrain.

I could follow this chunk of line blindfolded, although all this talk of steepness and slope has exposed the fact that I'm not much good at knowing what's up and down. Running up this section feels flat, or flattish, getting me

higher without going up. At least, never drastically. Hills and gullies formed by the flexing skin of the world, creased by rain, gravity and erosion, roll past as I cheat myself out of all those ancient folds of history. Yet as I roll out a slowish pace, switching shovel-carrying arm, I give a thought to the hardy railway makers who moved all the dirt beneath me, making a straight and even sloped line within a place neither straight or even. Thinking of their work seems to make my footfalls a little more loaded, as if in some respects the easy path is allowing me to think about things that are both beyond me and before my time. By comparison, following the well-worn paths of wallabies, wombats and deer that get made into human trails means that my focus is on footfalls, eye-gouging sticks and the thresholds of my lungs. Running the line is to find myself open to a recent layer of history that is fascinating, brutal and tangible, a charmed way of thinking because unlike most of my internal monologue it has nothing to do with me.

Jindivick-Rokeby: bridgework, 3 hours

As quickly as I've thought about the toil of dirt beneath my feet, I think of the craftsmanship and the skilled hands of bridge-makers when I pass remnants of a bridge on the side of the trail. Great rotting pillars with impressively intact cross-members are on my left as I ford Pilgrim Creek, a three-foot-wide tea-coloured charge of seasonal water. I know about the flow of Pilgrim Creek in great detail, having seen across the years its flow, or lack of one, through floods and droughts. Its course is a mostly naked traverse of paddock bottoms from its earlier life, sipped and pugged by cows. I wonder when platypuses last lived in Pilgrim Creek, or if indeed a hardy family still frequent the waterway, even if it's seasonally for their holidays. The old bridge has been replaced by a mass of concrete tubes, the likes of which would have been a fantasy of bridge engineers 130 years ago.

Old bits of bridge unceremoniously cut off at bolted sections have me thinking about rough-handed carpenters. I think of a chain-smoking Joe, who was in charge of railway earthwork, and I think of Bob, or Bill, who leads the carpentry side of things. I wonder how the heck timbermen lugged around such giant lengths of wood with no cranes or bespoke machinery, using their own arms, horses and pulleys to do what pneumatic arms with inhuman strength do nowadays, while I glide past on foot.

Several kilometres later, when I catch sight of the great, intact, original Crossover Bridge, I can't think about anything other than the impressive nature of decay. As I move towards the giant angular beams of the bridge's undercarriage, the mass of the structure, made from trees, sweeps away any need for imagination. Mossed and fungused and tucked away like a prized bovine in a hidden paddock, Crossover Bridge is the largest road-over-rail bridge left standing in the country. Feeling as mossy as the bridge itself, lathered in sweat, I pass under the massive timber legs in the centre line of the old track to avoid long tentacles of blackberry branches. Outsmarted, I'm instead snagged by a dangling length of old wire that coils madly from the upper deck, as if the last remaining hairs on its head have kept growing.

I'm impressed, even though I've been here hundreds of times before. As a timber man, I love what trees can become. More so, I love the fact that in constructions like the Crossover Bridge – a series of trestles made at various lengths to span a gap, then joined together by cross members and giant braces – I can see all the constituent parts: the materials, the way it was made, how it has sat and weathered and now proceeds on the inevitable journey back to dirt. I'm

starting to get the mystique of trains, their magical lines of travel that go everywhere with the help of bridges and cuttings, tunnels and tubes, and the humans that operate them, sitting on a stool, turning wheels and pulling levers, looking at the world go by, sounding their whistle.

Crossover: 3.5 hours

Five steps past the magnificent and rotting massif of Crossover Bridge, the old line turns to mud-soaked jungle. It makes sense; such a large cutting in a part of the world with high rainfall means the line is essentially a giant ditch to collect water. Tree ferns that once grew in Antarctica (*Dicksonia antarctica*) humidify the deep cutting, cranking up my workload. If I'd made time to stop, I would have checked myself over for leeches, which feel much the same as sweat running into your socks, making them easy to ignore. The unseasonal heat of the day has fast-tracked dehydration amid the humidity of the thick and moist vegetation.

The new road crosses the old line at right angles, spilling yellow clay from the infill and making steep, weeded banks to the bottom. It would have been a sad day to see this line cut in the first place, making a deep incision through ancient country, and sad to see the old line filled back in. Saplings grow at an angle and a fresh car body lies on its side, making the small tree it's leaning against strain in the wrong direction. I'm tempted to check the car for smeared signs of trauma, not knowing if a person had been in it when it careened off the edge of the road, but I have to squash my curiosity and push on. Scampering up the steep slope, I see old habits die hard across the eras of drink-driving, with beer vessels ranging from glass to tin to aluminium.

Well into mid-morning, having been toiling away now for over three hours, I am soaked in sweat. My undies feel sloshy, and grass seeds no longer bother me because they're lubricated by a steady supply of leg sweat that my socks mop into a second skin, feeling much like neoprene. Here I come across a prickly, blackberry-infested limbo, and it is this section that I've carried a shovel for, which in hindsight was a poor decision given I could have done an okay job of bashing through with a large stick.

I'm rewarded for my morning's work when I pop out into a grassy section overlooking the old mill site that was Crossover Station. It is the last remaining platform on the line, its steel pillars and timber slabs filled in with gravel. Clear edging still defines where people had to mind the gap, stepping onto a giant and loud loco, and it's in this place that I now stand with my shovel in wet green grass, hungry. Remaining still for a moment, which is rare on days like today, I picture the scene from all those years ago, which is made easy because of the large chunk of platform left in place.

In my small backpack, bobbing about with a bladder of water, camera, sunscreen and Vaseline, are three peanut-butter jars crammed with leftover

pasta. In an odd last-minute decision, I'd decided to eat leftovers for the day as opposed to energy bars and gooey tubes of electrolytes. I felt, perhaps a little foolishly, that I would be cheating myself out of the authentic train driver's experience if I'd set off with modern food, given that plasticised, gel-based energy wasn't around when steam trains were running.

I eat, breaking for the second time that day for much the same time it took me to talk plainly and non-crazily to the police, then I push on.

Neerim South: 4.5 hours

Neerim South holds a special part of my personal history in that it's where memory really starts. Pre-school, primary school, first sport teams and the nucleus of a milk bar is enough for a young person to gather themselves up enough life to think of themselves as a somebody. Firsts flourished here, as did new freckles and the concept of a favourite T-shirt. Music became a sound that you like, or not. I remember suffering through blistered feet, which was worth every bit of it, to extend the life of a new pair of shoes that I'd outgrown in a poorly timed growth spurt. It was here I was with my first girlfriend, though this was very much a pseudo-relationship as I'd been instructed to go out with her by the popular girl who ran things. My vivid memories of Neerim South seem boundless if I think hard enough, visions of a boy on his bike, sided by his best mate, creating ourselves in a town with a pool, sports oval, school, the hospital where Mum worked, pub, hardware store, bank and a small supermarket that sold fresh banana bread daily.

The ridge-dwelling inhabitants of this upside-down village, Neerim Southians, live among strong winds and leering sunsets instead of down by the water, in the creek, where the train once ran. Small streets that divert from the main trunk of town end in culs-de-sac and good views, meaning the town looks much like a stick insect when viewed from an airliner, dozens of which pass each day heading from Melbourne to New Zealand.

As I approach town, bashing through stands of willow – always willow – a large male kangaroo is spooked and crashes through the trees. We are both as surprised as each other. I follow his lead towards town, stumbling onto a magic piece of old bridge and the first, and perhaps last, railway sleeper remaining of what would have been about 130,000 laid. I'm a little surprised at how exciting the find is, such a simple four-sided piece of timber. Seeing and touching the deep creases of degrading between the 18th-century growth rings of the once-tree is utterly consuming, and for a moment an otherworldly departure from my haste. Hunting for gold or the secret jewels of a lost city would be no more rewarding.

Curious young Friesian cows make an appearance when they hear me talking to the camera excitedly. They sniff the air while closing in on each other, waiting for me to make a move. I slowly move through them, telling them about my find, to which they seem indifferent, more concerned with the spooky wind and summer flies. The last fence heading into town has me on my arse with an almighty bolt of electricity. I thank the farmer for my forced rest and vow to go a

little lower under or higher over the next round of fences.

Halfway marks of any expedition, adventure, or commute are always momentous to me because they show that something is going right, and that I'll likely get to where I'm going. I guesstimate the edge of Neerim South to be the halfway point of my run. I celebrate with a dob of Vaseline on my back where the backpack rides up my train driver's shirt, a starchy too-small business shirt with the arms cut off, wearing a neat and bloody hole just above my bum crack. The Vaseline stings for all the right reasons, but I know the jelly will do nothing but make me forget about the wound briefly. That's about all it takes to acknowledge things are ticking along nicely, distance-over-time, on track. I do what is really my one key ability in life and that's keep trucking, dob of Vaseline already smeared thin.

Neerim: 6 hours

As with the multiple arms, legs and names of the road I grew up on, the Neerim district comprises Neerim South, Neerim East, Neerim and Neerim Junction. It likely has Neerim West, Neerim Under and Neerim Upper, but I haven't been around long enough to know for sure. New people to the area seldom say where they're from, giving only the road name and number in case they stuff up where one Neerim starts and another finishes. I've lived within cooee of Neerim South my whole life and still get them mixed up, even on foot. I'm reminded that township, of *town* and *ship*, is an aptly conjoined word that calls to mind the hierarchy of both towns and ships. A cabin in a ship, on a particular deck, on a particular part of the boat, is like houses with a view, on blocks of a particular size, usually with like-minded neighbours on similar property in a house much the same. Just like the slopping bilge waters of a boat, where everything ends up, there's also the paint-flaked, industrial, crappy part of town with no view except for car bodies and blackberries. Towns and ships both have cabin houses and below deck houses. Now on the creek flats of Neerim South, where the line once tracked, is a culvert to cigarette packets and Jim Beam cans. Worse is the sick remains of the creek, once a vibrant place full of biodiversity as the wettest, most protected, life-preserving part of the district that is now only recognisable by being the lowest part of town.

Coming up to the first road crossing, I see the former stationmaster's residence, painted in the familiar trademarked colour of 'rancho', which is browny-orange, reminding me of the old farmhouse I grew up in. Same colour, picked and painted by Mum, my childhood home even looked similar. This dishevelled old remnant of the station house sits squarely on exposed stumps on a half-acre block of nibbled-thin sheep grass. Junk lies about in neat enough piles as if each owner, every decade since its use as a railway residence, went through an identity crisis and a renewed enterprise of industry. I fear for this notch-framed, pitched-roof, sash-windowed home in our knock-down world. There's no 'For Sale' sign, but there will be any minute, and it will say, 'Knock me down to make your dream home'. All I see is 'Preserve and live in this fixable, good-looking slice of history'.

A friendly, ribby horse slowly wanders towards me as I shuffle past. Limp, bullshit fencing made of lazy ad-hoc bits of anything and everything separates the old brown animal and me. Fuck, I think, there are too many animals like this kept by people who shouldn't own animals. I scratch his nose and move on, catching up with the film crew at the next road junction. It's nice to see my

friends and distract myself from an impending house demolition and a horse living a shit life. I push on towards a quarry that my friends and I used to think was the likely residence of He-Man’s nemesis, Skeletor.

Other Neerims up the line

I track through the back of Neerim not long after realising that places of doom for a kid – like a quarry, are less doomish to adult eyes, although the beautiful day and lack of a smoking volcano do make me feel a little more optimistic about the exposed innards of the Earth as I pass.

Knowing there are two or three bosomy lumps of landscape coming up, I autopilot up the easy, predictable, relatively straight and inclining section of track. My progress is not without surprises, as has been the entire run thus far thanks to my lack of homework and the unspooling roll of storybook farmland. Cuttings and creek crossings, fox dens and rabbit warrens, electric fences and more stands of blackberries occupy the decivilised line. Folks none the wiser about this area would have no idea that these cow tracks, windrows, and sublime driveways are in fact on an old railway.

Passing in the land beneath a favourite cheese manufacturer, not long after sweeping past the district's 'transfer station' (the tip), then a slice of my childhood best mate's farm, I pop out at a dirt road a stone's throw away from where my Year One teacher lives. Her parents, who live next door, mow the grass I'm sitting on. I eat lunch in complete shade, feeling my body over for wear and tear, eating the last of my gluggy pasta, which is great only by default since it's food. I feel goodish, a little underdone for food and leached of salty minerals that have hardened my pants with dodgy-looking white crusts. I figure I'll get the job done at this rate, and tomorrow, if things continue much the same, won't be a write-off. I guesstimate having run about 35 km to this point, and know there is at least another 15 km to go.

I hit another roadblock in the form of a driveway that looks as though it might belong to a fake church, with a keypad and fancy, freshly painted gates. The house must have incredible views on the other side, but I can't see them because the cultish gate blocking the cultish driveway and cultish tree plantings have stopped up every square inch of daylight. Like the old brown horse I took pity on, I feel sorry for couriers and acquaintances who have to sit here with their arm out of the car, plugging in numbers or talking to the gardener, trying to get past this horrible threshold. Turning right angles away from the line I vent my disgust at a landowner barricading the rest of the world from seeing any further from this spot, as if they own the view of their place as well as the view from within it. Hedges of introduced trees remind me of the walls erected between countries, made at eye-watering expense even in the face of the poverty of people on either side.

Not wanting to meet the person who owns such a driveway, I divert and parallel the line by about 200 metres. I'll admit I'm also reluctant at this stage to annoy any more landowners, cult leaders or otherwise, having come so far relatively unscathed. Re-joining the line several farms later, fence-hopping and feeling out where the line was pushed up or dug out and in some places still remains, I take a sweeping left-hand turn through a deep cutting. Now a driveway to several farms, the cutting leads into what I suspect to be the first set of curvaceous bends that will take me to the famous, also bent, final section of line, where seven huge bridges were built.

I'm now in country I no longer share a personal history with, having broken my boyhood bubble. I continue to feel wary, as I have to make a choice about whether to jump eight-foot-high deer fencing. I spend no less than five minutes debating the options, half enjoying the break in deep shade, feeling as if I'll get a shotgun blasted at my arse if I cavort obviously through open, highly fenced country. While I contemplate going under the fence, a man on a quad bike guns towards me at breakneck speed.

Amazingly, the man, who turns out to be a boy, doesn't see me, even in my obvious garb of resplendent blue shirt and flappy red bandanna. The lad skids to a stop at a gate and bails off to open it. As he goes through, I holler to him, scaring him half to death, and ask a menial question to defuse a potential situation. I see no great threat in the boy, but his boss, or dad, or mum, might want to string me from a tree.

'Hi mate. I'm a local bloke running the old railway line and won't be here long. You okay with me continuing on through this section to get over there?' I point to the other side of the glorious arched line that continues in that beautiful contouring way to the opposite hillside.

'Sounds okay to me,' he says, seeming confused about why I'd ask such a stupid question.

'Righto, mate. Good onya, enjoy the ride.'

'Seeya,' he says, and tears off over the hill as any 16-year-old would on a quad bike, full bore.

I like the simplicity of the young farmhand, lacking any kind of hesitation or resentment about my being here. I imagine he has forgotten me by the time he saddles the farm bike, hell-bent on doing whatever he was sent to do as quickly as possible.

The westerly view from here, looking directly at the sun as my run time kicks into its eighth hour, is of state forest, with staggeringly big, and occasionally ancient trees and never logged rainforest groves. Trees like the ones I see at the crisp fence line of the closest paddock, 50 m tall, almost limbless, three-feet thick, were the reason the line was built, to carry away new-world timber.

Through Nayook, the cutest little village you could ever imagine, I shift into making dim-witted decisions because leeching of vital nutrients have leached from my brain through an all-body, all-day, sweat fest. Being deprived of invisible life forces is much like overloading yourself with alcohol in that both potentially reveal a truer sense of yourself by paring back inhibitions. As a relatively benign drunk who tends to like people instead of fighting them, my true state of intelligence might be revealed by dumbing down during a hot day of travel, eating leftovers instead of scientific sports bars, and water instead of hyper coloured electrolyte.

All of a sudden, I lose the line. Not like losing your wallet, which could be anywhere, it's more like losing your socks in the sock drawer. Getting stupider by the minute, overexposed in a continent not made for my skin, I lean on a fence post wondering if the original surveyor on his horse might have galloped right, towards a line of crumbling cypress, or if he straightened out and went left. I split the difference and head towards a three-sided hay shed made of loose tin.

This all feels wrong, and it is, cutting across landscape with no real idea if a train once upon a time ran this way. Hitting an uncut shoulder of land that has definitely never shelved a railway, I take an obtuse angle towards where I should have headed and find the film crew at a switchback bend of a steep road. The view overlooks a magnificent stretch of line that cuts neatly into red dirt. In the distance is a steep gully where I suspect the first of seven grand bridges made this plucky train line get all the way to Noojee.

With the sun finally at my back, I reflect that the cutting makes an impressive line across steep country. I go down and up a heavily eroded, once magnificent gully, where a babbling creek gives the impression of timelessness. It is sick, of course, but it runs, and sounds as pleasing as any sound I can imagine, likely because I feel like getting on all fours to drink it. I don't, but feel refreshed after having heard the babble, and I head straight back up again to the even grade of the cutting. In contrast to bridge number one, which is non-existent, bridge number two, having spanned a similar crease of landscape, is in semi-forested bushland, in a giant pile of greyed, staggeringly big timber. Surprisingly I become annoyed, perhaps because a woodman like myself fantasises about the pile of milled timbers I'm looking at, as if Atlantis has been under my nose for years without my knowing. Giant, bolted lengths of wood lie like a book that's fallen off the bed while open, with some pages bent, and all of them pressed together awkwardly.

I celebrate my mixed state of mind by taking an overly yellow, nervous leak, avoiding a direct hit on the bridge timber for no other reason than it feels wrong.

The track takes an obvious, committed line through horsy properties with large gates, fat locks. and Keep Out signs. Bridges three, four, five and six are within this dense zone of steep country where deer hunters shoot and get shot at in return by landowners. I do my best to be an unseen fox before re-joining open track in gloriously sun-dappled state-owned bush. Sloping gently downhill to the last remaining bridge, number seven, still one of the largest trestle bridges in the country, I know the job's done, and there will be no more blackberries, fences or brain-fades. Dehydration and hunger, both kind of nice feelings to have when you sniff out a finish line, no longer matter.

I finish the day with a wonderful moment as I jog the beautiful arch of that final bridge and admire its grand craftsmanship: it's legged with entire trees, lagged with massive bolts and entirely notched by axe and sawn by hand. I know there are evils associated with a bridge like this – such as the staggering rate of deforestation it allowed in the valley, and many valleys beyond it, but such thoughts are only something I contemplate now as I write. In the moment, as I shuffled on towards the replica Noojee Station in a great mood, I knew fully well

I’ll be at the Noojee pub drinking a beer the size of my head before the sun went down.

CHAPTER 4:
JUNK

Heat, from above

If the adventuring part of backyard-adventuring doesn't work out for me, but I'm still caught up in the idea of raising my heart rate by doing odd things in the cosmos of my little farm, I might transition into growing marijuana.

I imagine local narcs, having picked up on my antics over the years, joining the dots with a recent spike in drug-related matters on my patch, would fire up their helicopter and hover over the farm to get a bird's-eye view of the operation. Their heat map of the five-acre triangle property reveals red-hot zones adjoining and surrounding the two largest buildings, then warm-orange lines fan out wildly to all corners of the block.

The drug plots look to be cleverly disguised between rows of grapevines, blended with pumpkins in a 12-metre-diameter wagon-wheel veggie garden, sharing a cricket-pitch-sized garden bed with tomatoes next to the road, and likely have something to do with the furrows that could be truffles, among salvaged building materials under the canopy of 12 large oak trees. When the helicopter lands on the gently sloped paddock, black-clad dudes jump out and throw me against the bonnet of my tractor, but they quickly realise that my farming activity really is just bad wine making, medium-sized pumpkins and tomatoes that should be staked. An alpha male unkinks my arms and straightens out my collar. I thank them for their time in an elevated state of emotion. They apologise, adjust themselves a lot more than they need to, and off they go.

Out bush, far from where I live, is where the real marijuana plots would be planted, among boggy groves, and on hillsides that are hard to reach and almost impossible to see from the air. I'm making this up, of course, but I often think about how possibility drug-growers do it. When I come upon a place that would likely grow things beautifully without others finding it, I unpack the venture in its entirety, from supply chains to booby traps. That, or I've actually stumbled upon the real deal in a place I'll not run through again, puckering up a little and wondering if I'm about to trip on a wire and get hoisted up into a tree upside down.

In truth, I'm far more attracted to making inanimate things. A helicopter

hovering above the farm scrutinising what goes on below appeals to my imagination because the helmeted, murmuring people in that aircraft would see a plot of land that represents busyness, conservation, enthusiasm and patience. Let me rephrase that; a plot that represents busyness, conversation, enthusiasm and patience by default. I am not patient by nature, but have found that I've had to become a certain type of patient if, for example, I want to make a shed from other people's scrap, run a long way, or write a PhD. Try as I might to turn things around in the same day I cook them up, it takes time to gather up materials, strength and ideas, thus enforcing patience upon my projects. I curtail this longitudinal problem by having many things on the go at once, and sure enough, things get done over time, as if signing off on a project I started years ago gives me the same sense of satisfaction as brushing my teeth. Like a slow-moving glacier that slips slowly downhill, or when conditions are perfect and the timing is right, calving off great chunks of obviousness every so often, there is always change on the little farm.

Seen from above, a view of my farm comprises triangles and circles and small buildings with pitched roofs, connected by well-worn lines. Hundreds of little jobs in various states of play are evident if you look hard enough. Some, like piles of firewood, represent a never-finished job split into seasonal, intense bouts of cutting and stacking at a time of year when heating yourself is an abstract thought. In the other half of the year, wood becomes a likable, daily, habitual chore that is much like drinking tea.

Even though the little barn would make an ideal nursery for growing dope, it is nothing more than a wood shed holding three types of wood: firewood that goes to the barn fire, which is big, ugly and knotty; firewood for the inside fire, which is prettier and small; and milled, salvaged, hand-me-down lengths of wood slotted in various types and thickness into an old canoe rack. The firewood is a life force firing up two key places of human habitation on the property and the milled wood has been used to construct these very places. While I return frequently to the fire areas, as they are the warm, social nuclei of the property, they are not where I spend the majority of my time. From the places of fire, even in summer, everything fans out.

On the hilltop is a cabin that is mostly done, but it needs a flue for the small fireplace and a lock on the door so that people can break in. The big barn and little barn still have some big jobs to attend to; temporary timbers brace the big barn together, which you can see from anywhere in front of the building because it lacks six giant doors that I'm yet to make. The back wall of the little barn consists of four sheets of corrugated iron awaiting a retrofit of old gates from Helen's apartment, which will be turned into sliding doors.

The house is unfinished in ways hardly worth mentioning, other than to say a lot of the jobs would be unknown to passers-by, or even frequent visitors. Jobs like giving a coat of tongue oil to an old church pew shelf in the kitchen, putting a permanent kickboard on the oak sideboard in the bathroom, or straightening out the flue above the fire by three degrees to stop me thinking my sense of level is out. Helen knows about and cares for only a few of the jobs, mentioning them strategically and repeatedly through the year, and doesn't know about the majority of the others. Because my wife only knows about a fraction of the jobs to do on the house, my work seem inefficient because I never seem to do any of the jobs she wants done.

Our wagon-wheel garden is a place of booms and busts, frequently left to its own devices for large chunks of the year, only to be turned over by rats and kookaburras. Then there's the post-and rail-fence of the house triangle, which is posted but in need of 50 or so rails, and wire, while two large gates into the paddock are temporarily blocked out with large timbers, waiting on Babylon to burn, which is about the time I'll get around to making proper gates. Of course, the house, barn, little barn, cabin, veggie patch and fencing function well enough to be left between bouts of work, often in wait of a few more vital ingredients to appear serendipitously on the side of the road. Meanwhile the unfinished barn is an ark of a hundred or more unfinished projects, furthering the idea that the bigger your barn, the more work you create for yourself. When I replace an axe handle on a rusty axe head, I then feel compelled to sharpen the axe head, which means using the axe, and keeping it sharp, which means one job has rolled into four. My barn should take over the rabbit as being a symbol of reproduction.

Fortunately, I take pleasure in knowing that I'll get to the jobs eventually, storing up several retirements' worth of projects for a slower life I suspect will never actually come. In truth I don't believe in the concept of retirement any more than I believe in a working and non-working life. That is, I'll work – meaning I'll make things of some description – in some capacity until I die, at least I hope to, because work, if indeed I call it work, defines me.

Talking to things

When I leave the house to head to the big or little barn, cabin or garden, I no longer think of myself as the only entity that speaks. I talk to myself, which means I'm actually talking to things. The veggie patch gets a few questions every time I pass on the ride-on lawnmower, as does the concrete water tank; it seems to respond in the constant weeping of its hairline cracks, which is reassuring because I always know how much water it holds. Characters of the cutlery drawer get much the same treatment when I root out my favourite spoon to facilitate a tin-of-beans lunch on the go. I tend to talk, things tend to listen. If a conversation is by definition a dialogue between two or more entities, then I live on a small property with hundreds of chatty, introverted things.

I must look bonkers to peeping Toms, but I figure it's even more bonkers to go about my solo days in silence, skulking about the place as if an apple tree isn't worth having a chat with. The point is, a naked human is a useless and impossible animal, hairless and slow, with small fingernails and mediocre senses. It is the tooled, cloaked, added-on world of non-human additions that makes us capable. Ultimately it is the things around me, and my relationship to them, that define me as a maker.

Tools

Making big and little things from wood is up there with my liquorice and banana obsessions, which makes the hand tools of carpentry my favourite conversationalists. Each tool, given how personal they've become over time – helping me, defining me, taking skin from me – has a home in my leathery, homey nail bag. Caked with glue, soaked in years of sweat and shiny where it rubs, tools hang from my hip like flappy, exoskeletal ligaments. I like to think of myself as a mother kangaroo with a front-loading pouch that holds my genus potential.

In the left pouch, divided into two main compartments and several small sleeves, are pincers, Stanley knife, assorted pens and markers, small spirit level and speed-square. Mirrored sections in the right-hand pouch contain an eight-metre measuring tape, three hole punches, drill driver bits, assorted pencils, nails and screws. Slotted into a steel loop behind the right pouch is my hammer, and on the left, which sits neatly at the top of my bum crack, slots my butt chisel. (It is actually called a 'butt chisel', because of its thickness and bluntness for doing brutish work.) Each tool is of high quality, has been with me for around 20 years, and is either worth fixing or doesn't break in the first place. When I lost then found my English-made pincers a few years ago, I almost wrote a letter to the manufacturer to tell them all was well.

I use tools often enough to call them friends, not acquaintances, asking that they hold on to the edge of a beam, or memorise a recent measurement, serving as both real and cognitive comrades. When a nail bends early, or the chisel dives off course (from poor use; Beau needs a banana), I mortify the nail or chisel wildly, insults I would never consider using on a human. Of course, anger dissipates as the blood dries and the throbbing eases, looking upon what me and my tools have made with great pride. Later that day, when I'm on a steep section of roof I shouldn't be on, calorie deprived yet again in a lather of toil and fading daylight, I will inevitably repeat myself, shanking a blow that goes close to losing an eye. Easy love becomes easy loathing.

Hammer in my right hand and chisel in the left, which is the natural order of things for a righty, means my Ape Index – a slang way to describe the ratio of an individual's arm span relative to their height – happily competes with even the most talented of disproportionally limbed athletes. Helen's femurs, which are longer than mine, have a different kind of evolutionary advantage. While I go about building things as a half-talented carpenter with hammer and chisel, knocking up sheds and houses and fences, Helen runs and rides through life with

the wind in her hair. It makes perfect sense why we married; one of us makes the house with an extended arm span via tools, and the other with incredibly long legs saves our children when it catches fire.

Helen's favourite tool is her bike; she rode frenetically and competitively as a teenager while working as a bike mechanic, and she's now an avid commuter. The bike is double-tooled: a tool fixed by other tools in order to function. The end point of this complex multi-tooling is when my wife rides, an intimidating evolution of flesh and metal weaving creatively through traffic, beating cars and trains, powered by half a muesli bar and the prospect of being late, which for Helen is always.

The bike, much like the sea kayak, may have reached apogee, which is said to be a peak of design. Granted, sea kayaks trump the bike by millennia in terms of human use, and sure, we change what bikes and kayaks are made of every other week, but a Tour de France bike now has a lot in common with one built in 1900, and the current Greenland kayaks born of 4000 years of adjustment look much the same as my plastic version hanging in the barn. Hipsters make bikes from bamboo and beard hair, and modern kayaks are made of carbon fibre instead of seal and driftwood, but little has changed in how sea kayaks and bikes look and how they function. Good tools tend to do that, they find a well-functioning pathway through years of tweaks and inconvenience at the hands of many, and the specialised, to the point where they are used with little thought or adjustment, as if they've always been complete.

In our hands and beneath our backsides, tools make humans a particular kind of problem solver and an even greater type of problem maker. Civilisation as we know it can be measured from the hands out. For all the good and bad reasons you care to think of, being tooled makes our humanness bigger, increasing our geographic, technological, social and cultural reach. Tools are also responsible for human population booms. Babies get made when a wrench (at the back door, used to fix a pipe) is used to warn off bears prowling too close to the house. That is, tools make us feel safe, which makes us attractive to suitors. I've long known this, fantasising that I'm one of those sweaty tradie types in short shorts who wanders through an office scene in movies and get ogled by sex-starved workers. Only I'd never be this person, as I'm unauthorised to wear my nail bag at work, and I save most of my projects, and nail-bag-wearing, for home turf. Helen occasionally mentions the practicality of my look, but rarely indulges in what I'm sure must be a pillar of our chemistry. In any event, I know exactly why tradie attraction exists; it's all about what that belt-wearing, khaki-clad person can do with their hands. I know, because I'm a hands man.

Hands

Of any body part, I appreciate hands the most. Eyes lie, legs run away, and while breasts are wonderful and practical, they're not really my thing. But hands, especially when they're grasping tools, from the wineglass to the axe, make me appreciate how much humans are capable of as the only primate with an opposable thumb to each of the four fingers. Here I am typing away, drinking tea, gesturing to thin air as I look for the right word. I can't imagine life without my hands. If I no longer had them, I'd have to completely redefine how I interact with the world.

I first properly noticed my hands when taking a photo of them. Actually, it was a photo of my right hand, taken with the left. Much of the photo shows my thumb, which is my favourite digit. I was working by the lake at camp in the U.S, alone, jacking up a mud-sunken timber boathouse. I was conversing with rotten floor joists and slippery boulders as they were my core company, and I hadn't warmed to my borrowed tools, yet. With a fresh wound on my chest inflicted by the wayward use of a ramming bar, I remember saying something along the lines of, 'Fuck me. Mate, have a break. Sit in the shade, drink.' and likely a few more swear words to hammer home the point that a break was the best option. Leaning against a sloped birch whose entire canopy was over water, meaning its entire root system was beneath me, swigging from my water bottle, I must have noticed my attractive thumb, covered in mud, showing me how good it looked and how hard it had worked.

Let me go back a step, to contextualise that particular camp experience, and the intimacies of that specific geographic location; Burr Pond, central Vermont, six miles from Rutland. It's an unfortunate name in a sense, Rutland, a place where people gather in a furrow, lower than other places. And true enough, it's now the end of the line, where the train only comes and goes from one way. But you can love low, rainy, end-of-the-line places because, more often than not, such places have stigmas of association from those who don't live there. Rutland is a grand town to me because camp was down the road, meaning it became my version of America, a zone where experiences unfolded from May to September for a decade.

This particular day by the lake was the first day of my fifth season working for Camp Sangamon for Boys, 'The camp with the pioneer spirit'. Boys were in fact more grown up than 'boy' suggests, often coming from the boroughs of Boston and New York. Street-smart well beyond their years, the boys would stay anywhere from two to eight weeks, nearly always there on the recommendation

of a friend, or a friend of a friend. I became an adult over the years at Sangamon, living and working in the same grooves I'd cut during my first addictive summer there. Guiding hikes and running most days, finding pathways in the forest of Vermont, I discovered what I like most about myself. In a lopsided, cockeyed way, summertime Vermont is the only Vermont I know, hyperactive green with balmy nights and long days, a single-seasoned place where a one-dimensional Beau exists. The Northern Hemisphere is forever dressed in summery skirts, soaked by beer and waterholes, and recalls memories of sleeping on couches and floors to fit as many people in the one spot as possible. Camp life itself entailed returning ten times a day to a massive old farmhouse to eat and socialise and tell everyone what you were doing next, after which the boys would come with you, or not, depending on how well others sold what they were doing. It was the most charmed existence a human can ask for, unhygienic in all the right ways, and exactly the kind of seasonal life I was looking for.

These ten weeks of guiding hikes and kayaking trips during the Northern Hemisphere summer were bookended in spring and fall by work as a cabin fixer-upper. Along with a few other transient types, I would turn up a month or so before most of the staff and we would go about straightening out cabins and outbuildings that needed TLC. When Vermont thaws each spring, a process that includes the top three feet of soil across the state which has been engorged by freezing water, everything sitting on the surface of the world moves. Nearly all the buildings on the property had been constructed by ad-hoc carpentry, made by councillors and campers over the years, which gave the place a remarkable sense of ownership by those who went there, but it also meant the building work moved about the place as much as the people who came and went. After a few years of dressing up the cabins to look good for parents, and serviceable as a bunkhouse for their children, meaning working on roofs, walls, doors and windows – things at eye level or things that leaked – I gravitated towards the most vulnerable part of a building: the footings.

Having come direct from pre-winter Australia, my springtime work in the woods (no longer called 'bush') was as much about straightening myself out. Day-ago Australian life had been an existence of short days and thick clothing, and here I was in the steamy preamble to a short and intense summer. My body will be forever shocked when it travels so quickly and unceremoniously from a place of winter to a place of summer. The world at skin level feels wrong, which means you notice everything, as if you're naked, or overly dressed. Air holds your attention because you think it shouldn't be that warm, or damp, or lit up for 18 hours with a hyperactive sun. Springtime Vermont is a head-exploding experience, the pollen-thick air full of swarms of cranked-up hornets and deer

flies that invade your space. Sneezing and swatting, sweat pouring from me, I would drink up to eight litres of water a day. During lunch breaks on the hottest of days I would empty sweat from my boots and treat myself to a fresh set of jocks. Even the rocks sweat on such days.

The job of jacking up buildings meant I was to expose, and fix, the sunken feet of the jerry-built cabins. Older cabins tended to slip into the dirt when they fell off their smooth-sided fieldstones, while newer builds fingered down on cinder blocks built too close to the wet ground. It was all beautifully simple, lifting one corner out of the muck at a time, and I was forever on my knees wondering if the propping and pumping would hold. In a land where I knew five permanent people, in a landscape where I knew the names of five trees, life was new again. Seemingly mundane, dirty work was exotic and novel, making it immensely satisfying, perhaps even more than my full-time gig as a guide. Double shaded by an exotic tree canopy and the brim of a big hat, the dirty, cumbersome and at times sketchy foundation work was the best problem-solving I've ever done, based on strategising where a handful of jacks, a pile of rocks, long nails and armfuls of timber would outsmart the heaving, sinking winters.

While my twenties at camp were all about creating hands I thought I wanted; cracked, strong, skilled enough and thick enough to take the repeated blows of impatience, it was other people's hands I liked more, particularly on women, which is one of the reasons I married Helen. Helen's hands are her best feature, and this is not a backhanded compliment, because the rest of her is positively excellent. Her hands are simply beautiful, defining my gazelle-like wife more than any other part of her limby exterior. I noticed Helen's extremities when scrolling through her eHarmony profile. Ripper, I remember thinking, tick. The photo spread she put up was a wonderful mix of outdoor activity with friends, always doing something, smiling effortlessly. There wasn't a single selfie, giving her profile a landscape feel, like a tourism ad for a pretty part of the world. My favourite photo, taken by one of her friends, has Helen standing next to her faded red car at the bowser of a petrol station, filling up. Sunnies, flowery skirt, summer, going somewhere.

Junk

There is no great synergy between my wife's overall beauty, and her magnificent hands, with junk, other than to say the link between hands and junk is symbiotic because Helen is Australian, and places me back in Australia to talk about reanimating things that others throw out. After ten years of guiding and building in the U.S., I returned to university life to study and teach. There were some like-for-like similarities between camp and university, such as guiding – which is much the same for 10 and 20 year-olds. The unlikes were that the huge university had an admin task for everything. My working life had gone from a box of nails to a can of worms.

It was about this time – post camp life, pre Helen – working hard in a university I only half understood, that my mum, who is a force of nature, was tossing up the pros and cons of getting a new hip. What this staggeringly brutal act of surgery proposes is a moment to ponder how we use, fix and discard resources. My mum, like an old table, while not the same in terms of sentience or carbon percentage, are both roughly the same weight and being well made to start with, last about the same amount of time.

Placing mum on the nature strip to be taken away during hard-rubbish weeks was well down the list of options. First, naturally, would be a new hip; second was recommending she spend the next 40 years living in waist-deep water, and third was to encourage a drinking problem.

Reluctance to sit my mother against a tree in the front yard with a free/broken sign speaks to my broader worldview. It is, I'll admit, a horrible type of affliction, especially when my daily commute weaves through suburbs during hard-rubbish collection. I fear that later in life I'll become one of those grubby hoarders, living among everyone else's junk and a project book big enough for ten of me living ten lifetimes. But for now, I'm vaguely hygienic in my collecting. Neat with piles, I give myself a quick cross-examination every time I see something half-usable on the side of the road. That is, if it fits in my ute, I take it, otherwise I go home to get the trailer, but only if I can still pick Helen up in time from the train (which is the cross-examination part). With only one tennis court's worth of stuff in a paddock that's at least the size of 20 tennis courts, I'm in good shape.

Passing on my predilections, I've been teaching paddle-making to university students for ten years, whereby I demonstrate the fundamental idea of collecting, chopping up and gluing together a 'blank' (which looks much like a giant cricket bat) before planing and sanding the awkward, heavy clunker into a beautiful and

light canoe paddle. At the heart of this idea is using thrown-out, forgotten junk wood, found and sourced from under our noses, which is the last place people look. In the simplest of ways, my directive to students is to get wood from anywhere and everywhere in a mostly legal capacity.

Wood, you say

Week One of semester is when students bring in their paddle-making wood. One unnamed chap by the name of James brought in a new broom, and his friend, who must have been drinking from the same waterhole, rattled in with a metal street sign.

Chunks of rotten, treated, knotty, glued-up contraband that's either halfway to being a tree again through decomposition, and sometimes isn't wood at all, gets dumped outside our outdoor education shed door, banded together with a hair tie or sticky tape. Homer Simpson's 'Wonder Bat', honed down from a lightning-struck branch, has clearly inspired the 20-year-olds who I teach. Sopping-wet, alive-yesterday chunks of childhood treehouse turn up, likely in a bid to immortalise the tree that once held a cubby house full of porn mags, or shaded them as they played in the sandpit below, eating acorns. It's a wonderful but flawed idea, as green limbs are unusable for the job at hand, being too wet for bonding, resistant to coats of oil and still wet enough to shrink, warp and bend. As the week rolls out, university security gets increasingly nervous, watching as our inconspicuous building in the corner of the campus accumulates the ugliest pile of wood ever assembled as if it's likely to be burnt in a séance by a strange band of students, which is half right.

By Week Two I'm starting to break through with the basics. Wood, I have to remind myself, is not a common ingredient in a Melbourne 20-something's day-to-day. Actually, it seems to be much the same story across age groups these days; a plank of wood doesn't seem to mean a lot to the average Australian. Even carpenters I know don't recognise what kinds of trees become the lumber they buy, instead knowing wood by gentrified names, strength ratings, rot ratings and if they're hard or soft. It is remarkable how much the life of trees – how they look and grow, where they grow and where they fit within broader ecologies – is removed from the hardware stores' version of 'wood'.

Spending half my life up a tree as a kid likely explains my love of trees. I suspect current-day university kids didn't spend as much time up a tree in their youth given how dangerous climbing is, and how heavy, dirty, woody and wooded wood is. But what many of them have learnt, through films like *Avatar*, is that trees are inherently good, so they're ready to learn about the wood business, gunning for action.

Monkey-see monkey-do teaching methodology means I bring in all sorts of samples to prove that there's wood and there's *wood*. Wood containing habitat, or the sickly yellow-green hue of bug-resistant carcinogens, is contrasted with

swamp-darkened 500-year-old pieces of apple box, or chunks of worn-out bedframe from a good Catholic home. Gum fills the ranks, rightly so, as it grows in more than 800 forms across Australia and is used in everything from knife handles to house frames. Succulent veranda posts, creamy windowsills and an odd assortment of anything woody, some of which I'm unable to identify, make their way to our sheds in every shape and size. Young pine – the backbone of plantation forestry, with underwhelming lustre and a short history to tell – is almost as common as gum, and perfectly fine for a canoe paddle. As I tell my students, if you close your eyes when you paddle you can't see the paddle, nor the water, but you feel it, and that's what matters.

Prospective paddle parts line the wall in awkward clumps, with student names scribbled on duct tape, in a procession to be cut into blades and shafts. The violence and efficiency of the drop saw tells a history lesson, not because it fills our faces with dust, but because it bombs our noses. Much like my hero Marty McFly, we all seem to fantasise about seeing and experiencing another era, travelling back and forward in time. Wood dust becomes this time-travelling portal if you breath in when you shouldn't.

Cutting across the grain of a rotten-ended veranda post, I smell deeply as the saw moves through the history of half a dozen human generations. With my earmuffs on, eyes squinting behind glasses, I listen only to my nose, imagining the mud and snow and wild animals that rubbed against the time capsule of the once-tree in my hands. My unremarkable human mind, with help from an unremarkable nose, is remarkable in its ability to conjure so much from the thick air. I know that the tightly grained cross-section on the outer layers of the tree is the youngest part. As nearly every schoolkid can tell you, each ring in the wood marks another year of life. This happens in the few weeks each year where temperatures change the most, as the dark wintery edge of a ring gives way to a creamy spring. In some types of wood, if you feather the saw by easing slowly into the timber, you can feel these years as high-speed teeth dig through the seasons.

Doing the math on the rings is called dendrochronology, the study of 'tree-time'. By knowing roughly when the tree was felled, or milled, you can find a line in its history that coincides with an Englishman stumbling upon Australia, wars, developments in impressionist painting, the first light bulb, the discovery of antibiotics and when daytime TV became a thing.

I think about the germination of a particular chunk of wood I'm holding, Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii)*, gentrified as 'Oregon' in Australian timber yards. (The name refers to its likely place of germination and growth, often hundreds of years earlier in the North-west of the USA and South-west of

Canada.) I'm genuinely captivated by the idea that this tree was whistling in the wind long before plastic was invented, before trains criss-crossed continents, and before painters had anything other than primary colours to paint their pictures (they were expert mixers). From a tooled perspective, their felling represents the breathtakingly efficient chainsaw overtaking the axe. Strong and lustrous long after its biological death, the wood smells like expensive perfume, and I reflect that it's still alive in some ways, in my hands and up my nose.

I find I have to cut to the chase pretty quickly with my students in order to tell a subtle tale of history. To do this, perhaps pandering to the current generation, I make the story of wood about the potentials of now, reverting to the simple equation of making a paddle from scrap timbers, by tools, worked by hands. Crafted to suit someone's height and hand size, a new paddle made from old wood starts the tree over again. The outer layer is protected by a few coats of oil in place of bark, locking away the centre, but the great and ongoing life of the tree exists in the worker's toil, as they've made a seemingly impersonal tree – one of countless billions on earth – into something that at least one person cares for.

To make the tree-wood-timber-craft analogy even more proactive, we add water. A paddle in our hands, even the ugly ones that need another round of heavy-handed planing, send us down a river. When trailers are packed, we head to Australia's largest river, the River Murray, to paddle a half-farmed, half-national park, 130-km stretch. Some of the paddles make their first dip into the river as newly sanded nudists yet to be oiled, then spend a few days swelling up like an emotional wreck. As if to force the idea that wood is emotive, trees often speak from the grave by producing a variety of splinters, reminding soft hands that wood is no longer a tree but a sharp and static version of its former self reanimated through heartfelt swearing. If you're lucky, you'll get a callus or two.

Tools, wood, hands

Fearing I've strayed, for your sake I must make sense of all this and steer the narrative back to our potential to make things. What I offer are a couple of recent projects that evoke my fascination with hands and tools and other people's junk, namely wood.

Naturally, then very unnaturally, wood exists in the world in many ways. Take millers as front-line and well-known users of wood; they like wood green and sappy, as close to death as possible, full of water to prolong the use of the mill's blades and teeth. The hardware and lumberyard likes wood straight and dry and knotless, keeping their carpenters and DIYers smiling, while the hipster-cum-artist wants it gnarly and holey and marked with the tattoos of industry or the crayon of kids, giving it a human-spun narrative. I like wood any way I can get it, which is usually when others have given up, tossing it out the front of their house or building site in an offering to the stupid bugger who thinks they can do something with it. Eating spotty bananas, which I'll talk about later, is much the same experience as pulling over for a pink, broken, Barbie-stickered bedframe.

Junk paddle

My most recent paddle is made from wood found between my office and the train station – a 2.1-km commute I take enough times each week to know how many dogs will likely bark at my passing. A student email about not having the funds to buy wood to make a paddle kicked off the idea, which told me he'd skipped the class when I got up on my soapbox and told his peers about the wonderful act of finding wood instead of buying it, which to me is as artful as it is fun.

'Wood is everywhere, mate,' I replied to his email. 'Along train lines, on building sites, under your neighbour's house, and on every second nature strip in Australia during hard-rubbish collection.' I emphasised the experiential component, which was just as important. 'You don't have to skulk around illegally,' I banged on. 'Hunting down wood that's shit to others and good for you is as free as the wind, mate, bloody good fun and a community service.' I mentioned taking along a cart and some beer, and to wear something fluoro so as

not look so obvious.

But back to the morning I found the wood. During our departures from Helen's apartment, as we each set off in different directions from the bottom of the stairwell, I mention to my lycra-clad bike-riding wife I'm about to go on a wood-finding safari, gathering up enough usable scraps to make a paddle during my usual 55-minute walk-train-walk commute. She thinks it's a wonderful idea, and not strange at all, trailing a sweet-natured 'Seeeyaalater . . .' to me as she pedals down the driveway with no hands on the handlebars.

I've prepared by bringing along an 80-litre hiking pack. By the way, Helen, before knowing I was about to fill the unusually large bag on my back with wood, didn't think to ask why I had a large, empty backpack with me. I suspect she knew I had a purpose for the large bag, and that was enough. It's nice to know that almost five years into our relationship she knows when not to ask questions.

As I wait for the 06:52 city-to-Frankston, going against the morning rush, I watch a fat turtle dove wander about the platform like a retired sports star, full of confidence and a well-fed middle life. The bird is clearly a train-station local because it barely reacts to the whooshing train sweeping in a foot from its tail feathers. The direction of travel I'm about to take is no mistake, having vowed 20 years ago that I'd never grind up against the masses in confined spaces as a way of getting to work. As a country kid I'm more comfortable sitting in the centre of a paddock, chewing grass slowly and sniffing clean air, compared to my city comrades, who seem perfectly happy fuzzing up against each other in a fog of pheromones. Going against the grain means I share the first carriage with half a dozen likeminded country types, sniffing and sleeping and chewing at our own pace, each of us in our own bank of seats.

I search out a bay of seats on the left-hand side of the train that sits neatly between windows, which means my head can be in shade while my legs get sun, and my eyes have a perfect onward view without early morning sun blinding me from the flanks. My choice of seat is no mistake.

In my mind, I finish half-conversations around me, taking up the dialogue of people on the other end of fellow passengers' phones. Between calls my main thought is that I should've brought along my brew kit to make coffee as I go, boiling up water on the floor between my feet and letting it steep between stations. I wonder if I can cook on the train, and know the answer as soon as I think it, but would like to try the idea nonetheless. The womb of the train is bright, although I'm still a little dull, having woken up only 25 minutes ago. A small door at the pointy end of the carriage reminds me that I'm being driven to work by a person I'll never meet.

My train journey of 38 minutes across 18 stops is pleasant and warm in this boxed-in, glassy, sunlit space, not unlike British sunrooms. No one here knows me, which is against my preference as a country person, but it’s the perfect start to the day as I’m not a good conversationalist when the sun’s coming up, selfishly wanting to keep my thoughts to myself because they’re the cleanest of the day. Genuine anticipation brims as the train leaves the last station, as I know I’m about to spend a few hours being thoroughly interrupted by my own curiosity.

Stepping off the train

Forget anything I've said to this point about being a banana-eating champion, inventor of the liquorice sandwich or best long-distance sea kayaker in my village. That's all a bunch of baloney. My one remarkable feature is that I'm good at finding things: screws on a recently vacated worksite, sandals that have been stolen from the front door by the district fox, or any one of Helen's everyday items that have been stowed in everyday places. Whatever you, me, or Helen has lost, I'll find it, but not before finding a few dried slices of apricot, a fifty-cent coin and three other versions of the thing we were looking for, likely in the most rational place we could have imagined. I suspect I'm the world's best finder of things. Not because I stumble upon things, but because I'm always looking.

The more obscure the item is that you or I are looking for, the more I relish looking for it. I become obsessive in my attempt to conjoin the forces that provide an environment for things to be lost and the human who discarded or lost the item in the first place. I think long and hard about the motivation patterns of arseholes who throw things away, and what absent-minded losers (losers of things, like my wife, *not* bad people) go through when losing track of their stuff.

I've logged a variety of urban and environmental scenes to the loss of particular goods. If I'm after a spare fuel cap for my car, I'll head to a busy roundabout close to a busy petrol station; if I'm in the market for a pocket knife, I'll search under park benches with hard-to-reach undersides, which are often installed in thickly grassed ecosystems that silently collect goodies slipping through the cracks. Money is always where it gets exchanged the most, cosying up with chocolate bars and chewing gum beneath the counter at 7-Eleven, especially the Australian $2 coin because it's small and sounds dull when it's dropped. Just as water pools in the lowest points between the folds of land, things that are lost and junked have predictable environmental end points. If academia and filmmaking don't work out, and I skip past my fantasy of growing dope, I'll start wearing Hawaiian shirts and become a fitter, less funny version of Ace Ventura.

Back to my commute: the green light of the ticketing gates relieves me from my role as passenger, and knights me as detective-obsessive. Metal and plastic and bitumen and glass become background noise as my eyes search out wood. Let me be clear: the finding of wood is not a sexual bent of mine, but it motivates me in much the same way; if I'm home late during the week it's not because I'm seeing another woman, it's because I stopped by the mill on the way

home to see which tree is on the rollers, about to be sliced.

I decide to walk my regular route, leaving the station and passing the edge of a grown-over carpark that has an awful lot of dumped rubbish but is light on for wood. I divert to an adjoining country train line with a single unfenced track. The flanks of the line have some attractive groves of native banksia and coastal tea tree, interspersed with invasive species such as boobialla and noxious wild tobacco. The ground is carpeted with Indian mustard and the yellow-topped onion weed. The scene is pretty and green, but it's a false harmony given the blending of plants from another continents.

As with so many train cuttings, the gently curving scar looks as if it belongs in the landscape, sweeping like a river, or a perfectly cambered road, even though it clearly bears the mark of humans. Buttered-up 45-degree sides give me access to the line itself. As a steep-sided low point in a relatively benign coastal landscape of sandy hills, the train corridor acts as a magnetic breezeway, providing respite to sailable flotsam blowing in from the surrounding streets. Sunless and forever shadowy sections encourage bad people to pull up in back alleys and culs-de-sac to unload boots and trailers, which means there's plenty to find.

Half an IKEA catalogue dies a slow death in front of me. An angular-limbed side table with broken back and legs sits a few meters away from a TV cabinet whose black veneer peels away from the particleboard in large curled-up lashes that make me salivate for liquorice. A rude-looking hole in a fence adjoining the back of a petrol station has birthed an assortment of kids' toys, and bags of clothing have split themselves open. I curse the world of cheap furniture, its made-to-break disposability, and the people who buy it.

I find the bottom rungs of a small pine pallet, which can be used as paddle blades. Like a wolf taking the plumpest organs from half-dead prey, I break away the unwanted bits violently and quickly. A massive, heavy-as-lead, broken redgum sleeper sits where it was laid the last time a trainline maintenance crew came through and replaced the worst with the newest. My back, and backpack, tell me that salvaging this fine piece of wood is a stupid idea. I stand there for a moment in the morning sun and consider how I could sled the giant piece of wood back to uni. I could make a dozen paddles out of this chunk of wood alone, but it would take me a thousand years to do so, and would likely bust the straps of my backpack, and my spine. Rather than take the sleeper now, I roll it into a heavy (although now flattened) stand of blackberries. I'll come back for this beauty another day.

Having travelled 800 metres along the line, almost halfway to university, I find the femur of a unicorn, otherwise known as a straight-grained, long-enough piece of Australian hardwood in the form of a tree stake. I brush off the weeds

and dirt and stand the length of timber up in front of me. Remarkably, the 40 x 40 mm-squared length of wood is exactly the right height, and the pointy end, made for sledging into the ground, can be used as the tapered handle. I thank the vandal who unthinkingly stole this from a council-planted tree and threw it onto the train line for someone to else pick up.

Another pallet, creamier in colour than the first, meaning it hasn't been here as long, with wider grain from younger trees, sits neatly next to a level crossing a few hundred metres from work. I pop this over two gluts of pine I found within reaching distance of the tree stake, all of which is uninspiring wood but perfectly okay to use. Other than some hardwood bits for the blades, particularly the edges that get banged around the most, I have enough wood on board to make a perfectly functional canoe paddle.

I enter the university grounds with my loot, passing a row of bollards joined with high-vis tape alerting me to some kind of nuclear spill. Taking my chances, and knowing that such bollards also mean things get thrown out in all the panic, I down my gangly load to poke around the jobsite. Within 15 seconds I find a healthy junk pile with perfect new offcuts and some old, but perfectly fine, garden edging. Boom! I think, and how fitting it is that I get the fancy inlay and edge pieces of timber from a rubbish pile within work grounds. My paddle will be a cross-section of my walk.

Content with what's strapped and bagged on my back, I switch off search mode and head to the work shed in the furthest corner of campus, where I'll make the paddle over the coming days.

I teach on and off for the rest of the day, making the paddle blank between lectures. First, I mock up a design. The beauty of junk paddles is that every one you make is different to the last, much like an artist using whatever paints are left from one painting to the next, providing a different blend. A small change in ingredients renews the creative application, even if only by a small degree.

After dismembering the pallet, picking out the best-grained, least knotty section with fewest nail holes, I set up parallel strips of wood to become blades on each side of the tree-stake shaft. These blades should be of equal weight; mirroring this way is called 'book matching', whereby you slice one length of timber longways, called a rip cut, then flop each new slice on its side and use one piece within each of the opposing blades.

I sand the joins to give a smooth and bindable surface to apply glue, before clamping, which makes the blank. Much like the meaningful mirroring of blades in the paddle, I reverse my day by heading back to Helen with the walk-train-walk, passing by the commute lands with occasional flashbacks, nodding towards wood zones and pretty trees. The train, as it did in the morning, goes

against the grain of the great hordes of people.

A canoe paddle is a magnificently transparent item, showing you the inside on the outside much like the exoskeletal wonder of a crayfish. You can see how the parts of an unpainted timber canoe paddle are reanimated: various layers and thicknesses, which way the grain runs and what type of wood is used.

If reclaiming and reanimating once-a-tree wood is the first great take-away for my students, the second is learning how to use tools to craft wood. My approach is to force their hand by not holding it. Students pay too much money to go to university to learn how to use a circular saw from a try-hard woodwork teacher. Learning how to use tools from a family member, boyfriend or girlfriend, friend of a friend, or anyone willing to take them through the A's and B's, is the name of the game. I think of it as encouraging tangible practicalities within a system of learning that more often than not usurps the use of our hands and individual nous with plagiarised, re-badged theory. I want students to become good at thinking on their feet in an unsafe world, since that's where students will have to make their most important decisions when class is done. I encourage approaching a task in a pre-mass-consumerism way. Not because automation and mechanisation are bad, but because some innovation seems to sharpen our brains at the same rate it dumbs down our fingers. I can't think of a better way of communicating the range of human potential than by making.

Once the glue dries – which is the next day, I simply trace an outline of my favourite paddle onto the glued-up blank, jigsaw out the shape, use a circular saw set on 45 degrees to make the square tree stake into an octagonal prism, then plane and belt-sand the entire thing an awful lot. The ensemble goes from thick, square and unbendable to thin, tapered, flexible, and light. Next, and last, comes the handle.

As the handle is the piece of the paddle that must feel the most comfortable, and tends to become personal because you grasp it for days on end, I sniff out a tree to do the work of timber, finding a downed limb of gum in the carpark. From the limb, several branches ease away from the larger section of branch to form perfectly natural, pre-bent folds that will fit perfectly between thumb, palm and fingers. After cutting out the branch sections into wedge shapes about the size of cheese for two, I glue each vee to the tapered end of the shaft. To give a visual, the garden stake with a point gets two wedges of wood glued either side, making it look like a bulbous 'T', ready to be shaped down to the grip of your hand. Once glued, I make a few preliminarily cuts with the drop saw before taking to it with the belt sander. When it's lean enough, and feels sublime to hold, I declare it finished, and rag on the first coat of varnish.

Paddle meets water

Using a canoe paddle, rather than propping it in the hallway to look good, transitions the canoe paddle into a remarkable, powerful tool.

My paddle, like a dozen other student-made beauties created for the occasion, is wrapped in a tarp and packed tight in the trailer with the rest of our gear. As we stumble from a funked-up bus, unbending ourselves to upright in a different state from where we got on, we stand our paddles against the giant truck of a redgum beside the sandy, cockatoo-screeched banks of the River Murray. Paddles tend to resemble their maker, as dogs do their owners. Abbey's paddle is a collection of parts that she didn't expect to be so beautiful, such as the handle that's delicate and just right. Tom has made a clunker that is brutish and square and twice as heavy as it should be, but will work, and is industrial-strength; it could be used as a bench. Jake is uncompromising, making his sublime paddle with hand tools instead of power tools, without an ounce of guidance, and with enough time and patience to figure things out. Hannah's paddle is meticulous and was finished early, based on the advice from half a town, with the help of her most trusted.

We set off down the river for a week of exploration, not for the river itself, not really. Day one is a transition day to shake off the vestiges of cars, phones and wallets. My paddle feels different, rather unexpectedly, given I've made dozens of paddles before. Having long understood the power of trees being wood, and having had the various layers of tools and kit that give me access to a river journey, I'm surprised at how the knotty handle and tapered hardwood shaft seems fittingly imperfect. I'm sensing one of the most fundamental human-to-thing attachments: when you make it, you give it more attention.

On my knees, pushing into my hip flexors and splaying enough to know that my left leg is skewed unevenly and perfectly, meaning I list the canoe on a slight pitch to aid in my uneven paddling, I lean into a right-handed stroke. My left wrist rolls over to complete the J-stroke, which self-steers a single canoe. An occasional drip from the paddle when I change sides every few minutes, or a sharp unexpected boom of water covering half of me from a wayward tennis ball being flung between boats, reminds me that the watery river is wet, and colder than the air. One of three pine tuckerboxes I made years ago for the program sits in front of me with a hand-drawn, plasticised map underneath bungee cord. Life is good, and the paddle in my hands is part of that goodness. Remarkably, it is the first paddle I've ever made that I'm actually using, having given them away for a decade.

Over the days, the students and I camp, talk, unpack, repack, give ourselves small luxuries and sleep like people who have been active all day. I contrast canoeing life to non-canoeing life in terms of how outdoor education is translated; classroom and river, comparing moments I think promote palpable, inspired learning. There is no comparison really, and one seems so much easier. Here I don't even have to speak to know that young adults are becoming new teachers. On our final morning, the culmination of this idea, we don't talk as we rise and depart in the dark.

Once on the water we embrace the steady push of the river in the absence of wind and simply float, getting cold again after the quiet hustle of breaking camp. Dawn eases in as we dodge snags as quietly as we can while birdsong, uninterrupted by laughter and paddle sounds, is so clean and clear it's as if you're hearing their sounds for the first time. After two hours of travel someone gestures to pull into a sandy bend, usually enticed by a full bladder, the timeliest kind of stop because it's not really a decision. Morning brew, which is actually breakfast, is fruitcake and a small stick-fire boiling water to make tea. It is here, over tea and cake, that we all come to realise how good the outdoors is at being the teacher, and that I, at least, simply need to book a bus and steer it to a place where water flows. Unravelling the week, students reveal personal breakthroughs that are profound, genuine, and meaningful, based on their day to day experiences of being outside, always. The river has enabled them, via a paddle they made, pushing them twice as fast as the river flows, which you might say makes them think twice as much.

Junk office

Let’s say a wayward moment of inspiration strikes. Influenced perhaps by a thoughtfully vandalised street sign on my way to work, or Banksy, I roll into work and arrange thumbtacks on someone else’s message board into a medium-sized cock-and-balls (medium being 25 thumbtacks). Such a brief, immature attempt at doing something a little off kilter, or creative, is about the extent I can change the physical world of my office cosmos. As I’ve said, any changes I can exert on my primary workspace, for example to the air, light, or temperature, are marginal. If I turned up with my nail-bag and started doing anything that banged, sawed or drilled, I’d be frogmarched from the premises. At least that’s what I thought, until I realised I technically work out of two offices: one in the climate-controlled mothership in the heart of the university with hundreds of other worker-bees ranked in various room sizes, with lifts, inbuilt cafés, lecture theatres and photocopiers; and the other in the wing of our outdoor-education equipment shed. I share the shed office, which is slightly larger than my office-office, with the outdoor education team. Occupying the space is a fridge, two chunks of desk, two wardrobes, a computer, a printer than ran out of ink in 2005, filing cabinets, two bookcases, an assortment of mostly broken outdoor gear and boxes full of geriatric maps that talk in miles and fathoms. Pens don’t work in the shed office, likely from temperature variation, and dust covers everything.

The shed office has suffered a small tragedy of the commons since it was built. Staff and students drift through the space, leaving hints of their passing. People fiddle, dump, and steal. Half an avocado owned by no one has on more than once occasion ended up in a box full of old flares. I stored homemade wine under a deep section of desk during summer a few years ago, having slept under that same deep section of desk the previous winter, blocking out the alarm sensor with someone else’s sock. Unlike my office-office equivalent, fresh air can waft

in from the outside world – thus all the goddamn dust – but the trade-off is the sound of birdsong, being able to feel cold or hot, and the simple ability to fix or change things.

Over tea one day, my filmmaking parter Mitch (who happens to also manage the shed ins and outs) and I cooked up a few rough designs for a shed renewal. More shelving, big desk, streamlined sides and opening up the awkward space to encourage more efficient human use. Incapable of being half-arse, Mitch mocked up a beautiful set of scaled, digital drawings of a new office and sent them off to other university staff to pass around.

Several weeks later I was going about my day as I usually do, that is, doing everything and nothing from the confines of my regular office box, when Mitch calls from down the hallway for a cuppa. Bless him, he doesn't drink tea or coffee, but knows I bathe in the stuff, and has come to the easy knowledge that I'm incredibly distractable with a hot beverage. He shows me the $12,900.00-dollar quote for the shed renewal, and my dirty cup of tea spills down my dirty shirt, bringing attention to the sauce stain in roughly the same place the wet tea now resides.

I take in the wording of the email, and swear to both of us, quietly, knowing that the kindly professor next door, a lovely chap, might be on the phone to a not-so-understanding person. Either way, I'm proud of myself for swearing mostly internally.

I fester. Front of mind is my concern that my mostly loved, thriving university is in the midst of rolling out a marketing campaign based on a genuinely inspiring theme: 'If you don't like it, change it'. The 60-second YouTube video pushes out the message through violent and bloody clips of warfare, elephant-killing, drug-taking and genocidal dictatorship, set to an intense and well-picked score of Aussie rappers A.B. Original's song 'Blaccout'. It was refreshing to see the marketing team depart from their 22-degree warm and safe stuffiness in an attempt to inspire 18-year-olds, yet after reading the email, there I was, caught between a good message and a bad quote from the same source.

Having been a carpenter in a past life, I knew the quote was bogus, a faceless contractor having a field day on small jobs across a postcode's worth of buildings. I sensed that such a quote was rarely, if ever, called out. What my irrational brain was telling me to do, the same brain that wants to fight people who yell at me from a passing car when I run, was pull apart the quote systematically, accept the job myself and set up a meeting with the contractors. Being sure to dress like an academic, elbow patches on, I'd ask the contractors to walk me through the massive inflation on materials (by around 300 per cent) and the obscene labour allocation (broken down to be $100 an hour for 60 hours of

work). I'd use words like 'methodology', 'transparency' and 'what-the-fuck'. Then we'd fight.

But as I indulged this line of thinking, knowing I'd never do it, I serendipitously tripped on a response. Lining the university's halls, quite literally, queued outside office hubs and choking thoroughfares, were dozens of old and new desks. Smacking me in the shins was the confluence of two institutional pet peeves.

Doing it in the only place you can

It seems old desks in perfect working order lack what all bipedal academics want: a desk housing a small engine with a large button that makes it go up and down. Behold, the sit-stand desk. I hate them, or as Helen encourages me to say, I strongly dislike them. I detest standing desks for what they represent: how much they cost, what they say about our jump-first office trends, and the cord attached to them, which sucks up energy like a well-oiled sports star. Most of all I hate the fact that once the new kid on the block gets plugged in, the old desk gets sent to the hallway to await a likely fate of becoming landfill, or a decade-long purgatory in a storage facility, collecting dust. Other than all those misgivings, I think standing desks are fab, ergonomically speaking.

Friday afternoon CCTV visions capture me and my outdoor-ed colleagues – Mitch and Jodi, also in on the act, which pleases me given the higher-ups would cause a mutiny if they sacked all three of us – wheeling out muted grey sections of desk from our multi-storey office block. We beeline past the library and old gym, then across the road and the carpark into an ominous-looking shed. The shed is of course *the* shed, as if a little-known country within a continent, loyally known about by the hundreds of outdoor-ed students who have passed through the place within a university of tens of thousands.

The innards of the building are like a pea pod, with five areas split into bays. We take up the neck of two bays, Tetris-ing the old desks around the drawbars of canoe trailers. We are hoarders at work, which pleases me given our contrast with the cookie-cutter, street-swept environment of a university. Just recently, across multiple campuses, some bright spark made the order to swap out countless hundreds of perfectly good, pretty, signed black-clad bin stands with silver ones, at eye-watering expense. I watched as the black ones got piled up crudely in a cordoned-off section of carpark, then just as crudely loaded onto trucks and taken to a dark place somewhere. I thought about making a film about it, but missed my opportunity in the face of staggering, surprising efficiency. It seems the dodgier a task is at an institutional level, the faster it happens.

The scene of a tall man, medium man, small woman and half a dozen desks is one of quirky rebellion in the face of bureaucracy. Without realising how much we're also a product of compliance, we put out fluoro cones when opening up the shed doors so that people in cars keep clear of the hustle, as if three people and large slabs of desk would be unseen by a driver at walking pace.

The shed itself is a building that occasional visitors wouldn't notice, although the college students living next door might think its insides have a neat plastic

sheet permanently laid out to catch all the secretive activity that surely takes place there. I fantasise that people think I'm Dexter, or Batman, as I come and go. More often than not, I arrive dishevelled and unshowered in three-day-old clothes, with bloodied and barked hands, leaving six minutes later a better-kempt version, toting a leather bag and damp, civilised hair. The other main role of shed life is coming and going from fieldwork with students in tow, which presents the complete opposite scenario: students roll in for departure smelling like a lolly factory and return smelling like armpits, albeit leaner, hungrier and in a better state of mind than their previous selves.

The making

Unlike the making of a canoe paddle, which has elements of poetry and artfulness, making a new office from old desks is like making a cardboard box from old cardboard boxes. Trees, wood and smells of sap and history have been dissolved by a dozen layers of industrialisation. It makes old-new desks a bit like plastic in their brilliance: completely junkable, made of a million parts put together by a phantom process few will ever see or understand. True enough, like the granules of plastic that get moulded and thinned and transparentised, desks are made up of sausage wood, which comprises every bit of a usable sawlog that has been deemed unsuitable as a plank, a slice of beading or wood that looks like wood. Beneath the veneer of desks is a slurry of glue and woodchips pressurised and cooked into shape through a remarkably innovative process. We're told that the granulated insides, as with sausages, are indeed leftovers, and I hope this to be true because there are plenty of stories floating about that suggest even sawlog, good enough to make the grade as a version of its old self, ends up in the pot.

I feel like a shifty lawyer who turns murder into manslaughter when I build something out of old desks. Chipboard is still wood, but you'd never know. Craft itself changes. You no longer have to think of wood being kinked in a particular direction based largely on grain, which gives you a right and wrong, strong and weak, pretty and ugly way to use it. Grain, after all, tells you how the tree grew, where the sunny side was, what bugs it made friends with, and how many limbs forked off to make a canopy. Chipboard has all of this in there somewhere, but it's invisible, looking much like thick sand, or indeed, sausage meat with breadcrumbs, when you expose its innards. Building with chipboard becomes like a Year Seven geometry lesson. Shapes that were ergonomic in the 90s have to become boring straights and right angles again in order to make a long desk go from one side of the room to the other. Shelving is much the same, with the rectangles of every width and length.

To attack the project in an all-out bonanza, which I figure to take somewhere between one and one and a half days' work, or 8 to 12 hours of cutting and drilling, I imagine that the demo and construction will require ski goggles, several sets of earmuffs laid at making and cutting sites, hat (because who knows, I might go outside to leak) and a bucket of drinking water because it's summer, and bloody hot. I overdress in long-sleeved shirt and pants out of habit, and to save all the cuts and scrapes for my hands only. Mitch will film the endeavour, and Lara, our education faculty social marketing manager (another

friend to get sacked if all goes wrong), will take photos. With this dream team assembled, I go bananas, wishing I'd actually brought along bananas, which reminds me of liquorice.

As happened to William Wallace's corpse, I dismember the desks into four neat piles of parts, standing them in the four corners of Bay One. Each pile represents an anatomical section of the new office: desktop, desk legs, shelving sides and shelving-shelves. After measuring things out a dozen times, I clamp each slab of sausage wood to a fold-up workbench that I keep in the shed for paddle-making, then remake the obtuse angles of wrap-around desks into right-angled boredom. The rest plays out as you would expect, with glitches here and there: lots of loud noises, sweat running down my bum crack, steamed-up goggles and swearing when the odd 100-mm cockup happens. (I sometimes read a measurement of 1222 as 1122 or 1322, a propensity that's known as *dyslexia carpentarius*.)

Building for me involves unadulterated immersion. World wars and famine and trees getting cut down don't exist when I'm neck deep in a project. Surrounding myself with these moving parts that I can see and contort, like slabs of wood of all shapes and sizes, is full acknowledgment that they have value as part of something bigger – like an office. This is liberating work; I can start, problem-solve, make and finish a job without ever having looked too far from the action of my hands and the conundrums of creating something bespoke. When ingredients are few, and the potentials are great, single-mindedness seems to flourish. I know too that a few decades of outdoor life have made me a particular kind of builder.

Mum once helped me hang sheets of corrugated iron on the outside walls of my big barn over the course of weeks. She hates heights, so her one request was never to leave the ground. Her key jobs were to hand me things, hold ladders and never cease to comment about the lack of safe work practices, for example my tendency to use ute-based scaffolding and stand on the top rung of the ladder. Mum was a wasted talent at ground level, as an ex-theatre nurse and as bright as they come; she knew which tool, screw or section of wood to hand me before I did. We all agree she should have been the surgeon, and not the person handing scalpels. When I produced a hot lunch from scratch one day in as long a time as it takes to boil the kettle, every move efficient, every tool fit for purpose, she commented that my outdoor ways of living had come indoors. True enough, I thought. The apple doesn't fall far, we're each nurse and guide in whatever we do.

My time is ordered by simple systems that are reduced to the fewest moving parts and broken into workable chunks in order to make, enjoy, use and move

on. I make a meal with basic ingredients, using one knife, in one big pot, and I eat from the same pot using the same spoon that stirred the meal into existence. If all goes well, the meal tastes excellent, and my food buddy won't be offended when I eat the first half before passing over the pot and spoon for them to have the second half. It means we miss out on eating together, but we save on dish-washing.

I can't pass the pot when I'm building, however, because I'm most often alone, meaning my occupational health and safety standards aren't influenced by the safety or hygiene of others, and I'm driven by the same mantra of maximising time and ingredients. The intensity of my time management techniques, which doesn't let up until the job is done, is an easy sell to yourself when you envisage the task can be done in the confines of a perfect, efficient single day. This is not advice for living well; doing as much as possible in the least amount of time, because like so much advice, it's hugely flawed and entirely contextual. Even so, making a desk from junk wood when I really should be budgeting for a conference in New Zealand becomes an intense one-pot wonder because it means something like a new office made of old desks can actually come to life, and I can shove it to the man, rather than letting these ideas flit away. And besides, I love the work.

Contextually speaking, this construction means multiple forms of life can coexist under the one roof, such as that of carpenter and academic. This coexistence is rarely possible, to the detriment of institutions whose leading figures make a song and dance about being staggeringly good at one thing, even though many, including myself, are staggeringly mediocre. An adventure-education lecturer at our university, for example, toiling away on an academic contract, would not be allowed to be our shed-maintenance person as the work is seen as 'professional/non-teaching'. But we should be able to use our hands and brain in equal measure at universities. Regardless of how satisfying a peer-reviewed publication in the academic world can be, or being asked to keynote about the prejudices and brilliance of adventuring, both of which I enjoy, they have nothing on the sweated-up, problem-solving bonanza of making one thing into another thing with my hands, brain working a million miles an hour.

Of course, this is also my failing. If I were to ever have a job interview where someone asked me to reveal my character flaw, this is it: tunnel vision, burning hot kilowatts of calories on one goal. To make matters worse, I'm more often like this in formal settings such as paid work when I risk getting fired, or in circumstances that might get me arrested, as I have been in some of my films. If I decide to make a garden shed out of an old cupboard at home, which I did, it takes weeks, and now I've taken on several garden sheds at once, spreading my

tools across four jobs in various states of play. As any successful job applicant knows, you should exploit your weakness by going to bed with it.

By the end of day one I have the desk in place, screwed tentatively into position, hedging my bets that a brainwave will happen overnight and a tweak or two might be made tomorrow. The left and right shelving, suffering end-of-the-day decision fatigue, are also tacked into place. Yet to be made is the long top shelf that will go from one side of the room to the other, largely mirroring the desk below. Awaiting facelift are two purple cupboards yet to be refitted with rails and shelving to house a dozen slide-in, slide-out crates. The doors from the cupboards will be used for the long shelf above the desk, held up using second-hand right-angle brackets. Exposed sections of sausage – a side of chipboard that has no plastic edging because I've cut it to size – will be covered with strips of hardwood leftover from paddle-making, finishing off the project so the space looks much like a hipster café, or illegal shedding at a carpenter's house.

Resting for the first time that day, I sit in the carpark drinking a shitty cup of green tea. I don't like green tea, it's bitter and cruel on my milky tastebuds and completely misses the mark as a celebration. But sitting feels good. Really good, because rest at the end of intense work feels like it's the only thing left to do. Washing away the horrible afterburn of green tea with an out-of-date beer from the fridge crosses my mind, but I don't trust myself to have only one, given how parched I am, and I'm forever in fear of being breath-tested in Australia after too many close calls as a stupid young man.

On day two I'm expecting a top of 40 degrees by lunchtime, so it passes in a blur of sweat with the prospect of a happy ending, which is a cold shower before drinking real tea in a place of deep shade and breeze. I start early, but then I read some work emails and my mind is in two places. Splitting the day as carpenter and academic proves another weakness of my character. One or the other, I'm solid, even inspired, but with two hats on during the same day I make mistakes with my measurements, meaning I'm thinking too much about anything but the wood in my hands. Nonetheless, given the pressure-cooked day of booming heat and relentless inbox, I surprise myself at how relaxed I am with the remakes and redesigns.

Saving the most visually pleasing jobs for last, I finally affix the hardwood beading along the front of the desk and screw into place a central leg in the form of an old veranda post. It all looks remarkably simple, and it is, reminding me that things that look and function well in a finished state appear just right. You know it's meant to be when, after you finish, you feel like immediately using the thing you're looking at. Hidden in this desk is the fact that there are twice as many joins as there should be, bound together with screws that are either slightly

too long or a little rusty, and that cutting and pulling apart and smears of blood marked the surfaces mid-way through.

Not to say that this office is artless, far from it, but it doesn't look like a regular office at a modern university, whose outfit always seems aimed at winning architectural awards, after consulting people who pick colours and fabrics at staggering expense. And these architect-designed buildings often are artful and beautiful and practical. My beef is not with some of the great new buildings that get built at wealthy universities. No, my beef lies with the blatant amount of waste that goes into their construction, and the contradictory greenwashing on every second billboard (which I've seen in dumpsters after the campaign has run). Frustratingly, the friendly middle-people in this whole process, the numbers of whom seem to outweigh the number of actual tradespeople, justify every ounce of expenditure on a litany of on-costs that make a simple carpet job end up costing the same as a new car. Simplistic and naïve thinking, which doesn't mean it's wrong, would report that modern businesses are all about making jobs out of thin air by charging too much for things that shouldn't cost so much.

At close inspection, I guess you could say a junk-made office is not a sleek or professional workspace, with its scars and oddities. It's true that the creation of such a room flies in the face of the demand for sit-stand desks, which require blank rooms with a power socket and become a 'hot desk' in more ways than one. But with a few scenic watercolours, a photo of check-shirted men on top of a crag, a bulldog clip holding recycled paper to write the day's to-dos, this junk office is a fine space to lose our short-sighted eyes in no time at all, making it the perfect kind of space to read emails and pore over maps.

Dollars and sense

One of my good mates Benji is a forensic accountant, which means his dog is named Excel, and he occupies the corner office next to the owner of a drug cartel. Both lies, of course, but from what I can tell, Benji and his kind do more gambling on sport than actual accounting because they're so good at their job they have more time and money than anyone else. At one stage in history, somewhere between the invention of pencils and computers, Benji would have used a purple pen a few hours a day for his morning's work. Red pen would have been deemed too murderous and wrong, black too similar to the text of forms, and all the other colours too hard to read. Purple became the colour of correctness. So, with Benji on speed dial to check my accounting, to put a purple line under this job, the breakdown of numbers for 1 × junk office look something like this:

Actual cost

- $12.50, for one box of 100 × 35 mm zinc wood screws. (I used mostly second-hand screws from the original desks, and a box of mongrel/assorted second-hand screws from home.)

Implied costs

- Labour, 10 hours @ $50 an hour: $500 (This is the rate I get paid for emailing/writing/teaching/guiding.)
- Co-worker/subcontractor help from Jodi and Mitch: one hour each for moving desks from regular office to shed: $100
- Laminated chipboard at new cost: $1100
- Pine railings for slide-in, slide-out shelving: $25
- Box of 250 35-mm zinc screws: $20
- 3 × 200 x 200-mm brackets (2 for shelving, 1 for desk leg): $18
- Superannuation/insurance/on-costs for contractor: $500. (I called Benji and we agree $500 for 1.2 days of work is reasonable and perfectly inflated)

Non-costs

- Tools of trade (comes with per hour on-costs. Benji agrees.)
- Skills of trade (see Tools of trade)
- Lunch (two tins of beans and one horrible cup of green tea; see Tools of trade)

Non-thought costs

- Storage of five desks at university's second-hand furniture warehouse for five years before no one buys them: $25 a year each, totalling $625
- Contractor fee (after five years) to put old desks in dumpster: $240
- Tip fees for desks in small dumpster: $120
- Cartage and pick-up of small dumpster: $80
- Carbon expenditure in operation of storage, removal and dumping of old desks: 250 kg (100 kg for transport and 150 kg for operational costs) offset by planting 2.5 trees per year, $58 per year ($8 for trees and $50 for planting): $290
- Environmental impact of formaldehyde in desks in soil and noxious gases expended over time: Bad.

Actual cost

- $12.50

Actual cost plus implied cost

- $2263.00

Total saving (from original quote of $12,900)

- $10,637.00

Actual cost minus non-thought costs

- $12.50 – $1355.00
- Saving of $1342.50, which would make a total saving of $11,979.00

That saving on the university's quote of $10,636 would have bought the outdoor-education program 7.25 new canoes, which we didn't do because I didn't dare tell anyone about it, although the film about the project has been watched by hundreds of thousands of people on YouTube, got written up in Australia's biggest newspapers, and was a feature article in Environment Education Victoria's journal, *Eingana*.

Over the course of a few weeks, several of my colleagues came to see the junk office, likely to witness how their old desks – inanimate objects they'd spent more time with that their families – had been reincarnated. I got the impression that all of them thought the office was a good thing, which is in itself a good thing. Our campus support manager, who oversees everything from office refits to buying coffee machines, did not condone the business of making a junk office nor condemn it, which is also a good thing. After they saw the film online, highly ranked professors who make the university more money than I ever will sent me emails saying they thought the junk office was marvellous.

CHAPTER 5:
EAT

Eatie vs foodie

I'm not an expert on food, I'm an expert on eating. We all are; whether we're any good at it or not is beside the point. You could imagine that a chunk of writing about eating should really be about food, because eating is just the operational part of our hand-to-mouth, jaw-going-up-and-down, sucking-to-drink, slurping lives. But no. Eating trumps food because I can control what goes in my mouth, but I can't fathom the complexity of food, not really. Not forensically, like an astronomer looking through an eyepiece magnifying the sky to interpret the blips, or a professor of nutritional biology telling me that a chunk of liquorice will spike my blood sugar based on glycolysis, a process that's taken 100 years of rolling theory to prove likely. Taking a plumber's shovel to a pumpkin, for example, which works better than even the sharpest of kitchen knives, provides an impressive cross-sectional view of a pumpkin, but seeing the resplendent flesh, with sliced seeds among the cerebral membrane they sit within, doesn't get me closer to knowing what's actually in all the orange matter.

Food is a vast universe of unknowns and theory, while eating entails simplistic levers and tools. Off we go ingesting a million and one things that please us and don't kill us immediately, because all food, over time, by degree in one way or another, is the death of us. Some foods are efficient at making us dead, while others take the long road, stretching us until our limbs no longer work and our heart needs replacing. A handful of the wrong kind of berries, for example, will make you see double, then triple, then nothing at all, while another will lube up your joints as if a miniature oil can has been put to use without you knowing. Two handfuls: one has you stiff as a board by sundown, and the other could mean you do a jig on your 100th birthday. Even water, boring old eight-cups-a-day to be a supermodel, will kill you if you have too much. It comes free with a slice of lemon at the same bar that sells you equally potent stuff that, by volume, will also eventually see an end to you.

Fridge knowledge

My food knowledge quickly turns to eating knowledge, as it does for many of us. The contents of a fridge, tuckerbox and cupboard, being the end points of a trip to the veggie patch or market, conspires with habitual forms of a hand-to-mouth life. I've started to take a genuine interest in what I shove down my throat ten times a day, in how certain foods immediately, slowly, or over longer periods of time make me feel. I'm interested in the residue that stays in my body, which I can't see but can sometimes feel, as with a hangover. When I realised that what I eat, what I've eaten, and how I eat will unavoidably and to a significant degree dictate how I live, the subject of eating seemed shockingly relevant. Up until that point eating was simply an activity that was done all the time, albeit pleasurably, to stave off the feeling of being hungry.

Foodies will be screaming, rightfully so, if I continue to harp on about the food vs eating debate, but my point is that the theory and complexity of what's inside food, and what food does to us in various combinations, quantities and consistencies, seems to change each time the Earth completes a lap of the Sun. I'd rather inquire about my own experiential understandings of what goes in and how it makes me feel rather than reading about it.

Sauce knowledge

Expedition partners over the years, or my students, would vouch for me being a simpleton in how I eat, as I often take a bulk supply of one food into the field and take few luxuries, never really dwelling on the finer points of mixing and blending. Flatbreads without butter, brown rice that's warm, or half cooked, and leftovers in any form long after they should have gone to the chooks are fine by me. Indifference about food has got to the point of being a character flaw of mine, in the eyes of others. For my part, I love simple eating because it involves fewer moving parts, is more efficient, and – this is what shocks people – for the taste. I love simple tastes. Rowy, my best mate, who is a good eater by his own reckoning, gave me an evergreen piece of advice one day when we were eating California rolls. As a man of taste, I was surprised to see he didn't infuse his sushi with soy sauce. 'No soy, mate?' I asked.

'Nah, don't use the stuff. You can't taste anything. All you taste is soy.' There were two clear messages in Rowy's genius words: 1) sauces are brilliant in that they make whatever you're about to eat taste like sauce, and 2) without sauce, you taste the thing that would otherwise be soaked in sauce. It seems my friend's dual stroke of advice has been a pillar of my eating ever since, because I'm now a man who loves sauces for what they do to bland foods, and love bland foods for what they lack in sauce. Most of my meals now revolve around this basic mantra of consumption.

Of course, I'm oversimplifying things. Foodies once again are screaming from their kitchens saying that complementary cooking is all about taste enhancement . . . I know this, and I like the flavours you concoct, but I just don't care to create them myself. I also know that reductionism, which I was briefly trained in as a green researcher embarking on a PhD, is a maddening pursuit, as it involves layering up complex and tangential thinking only to boil it back down to essences and simplicity, which seems to me like getting drunk every day for a year to demonstrate the folly of alcohol.

I like food of all shapes and sizes prepared in complex and wonderful ways but I can take or leave such mouth-watering creations because I've never craved complicated food, even when genuinely hungry. Marooned on expedition somewhere with an endless supply of couscous doesn't spiral me into fantasising about duck a l'orange slow-cooked for three days and served with seasonal vegetables that have been glazed in the reduced innards of the same animal. I'm sure I'd love the taste of such a creation, but when I'm sitting in the sand, looking out to sea, a bit hungry, I just feel like an apple, or a biscuit. I suppose

I'd call myself an eatie. Much like running and paddling, food gets me places, which is a utilitarian approach, but perhaps the march of time demands it. I like my sea kayak and a good pair of running shoes a lot, and would even say I love them at times for what they allow me to see and do, thus I say the same for food: it enables me.

When things get serious, I think of bananas.

It's no accident that a cluster of bananas is called a hand, and you've heard what I've had to say about hands. Hold a hand of bananas in your paw and you'd be forgiven for seeing double. Granted, you'd have a severe case of jaundice with all that yellow, and golly, you would have large hands, but in my mind what you'd be seeing is the confluence of supreme evolutionary success, linking a fleshy, skilled human hand with a non-human equivalent.

Case in point: the re-stumping job I did at the Camp Sangamon boathouse in Vermont, down by Burr Pond, was fuelled mostly by bananas. A mix-up in the ordering meant that a box of Columbian cavendish was without eaters and was browning away in the storeroom, ripening by the minute. When I rolled into camp on day one, I could sense their presence, the sticky air fogging up the place as they turned from yellow to brown. As the pigs (actual pigs, not American children!) had yet to arrive for their summer vacation, I knew that I had to make good of the situation. The hands of Cavendish and I, after all, had come a long way to be in that one spot. It was serendipitous, you might say, that the two southerners in the kitchen combine their forces. I stemmed the growth of the localised fruit-fly colony by placing the box on the veranda, where a steady breeze blew, and placed a plank of wood across the lid of the box to keep the squirrels out. I would see to it that the 5000 calories of energy would go to good use. The following morning, day two of that particular stint in the U.S., having heard the night before that the boathouse had sunk into the mud, I packed a set of tools, a dozen bananas, and headed to the pond. The rest you know.

Much of what I think about eating now might very well stem from my increased curiosity about life closer to home, a curiosity that is both practical and philosophical in nature. In part, encounters like eating sushi with Rowy have added to my increasing interest in our food-obsessed yet often underthinking population of humans who want everything immediately, who want to be full of maximum health while tasting food that is rich, wicked and aspirational.

To save us from any more of the food vs eating debate, which is pointless since, when you get down to it, most of us would agree that food is life, life is food, I will discuss how my fascination with my lack of deep food knowledge has turned into a midlife experiment with eating.

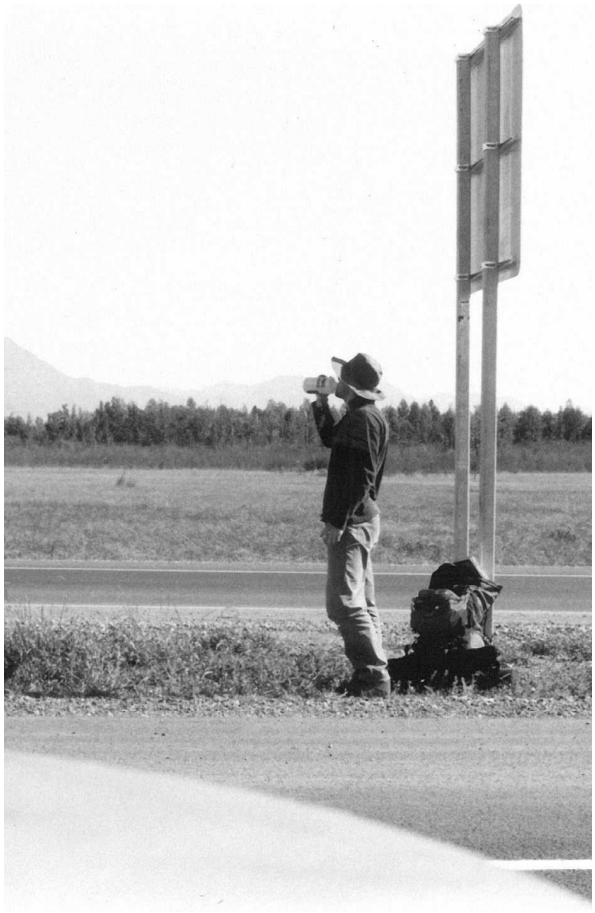
What the fridge and sauce told me

We’re not there yet, though. I’ve only recently arrived at my current thinking, meaning I have to go back to when I was a newly minted adult to gain insight into where the differences lie between then and now. It’s taken most of my adulthood for me to appreciate that eating might well be the most adventurous, life-affirming and infinitely challenging thing I’ll ever do. Here’s where we need backstory to frame where my midlife experiments have come from, as if the next few pages are a geological lesson in hydrology and physics so that we might understand how and why a spring came to be in the middle of my paddock. My attempt at mapping my self-inflicted eating-based experiments starts with my year of study in Canada, before my decade of U.S. summers. At that time of life, I hit the road to experience what my imagination had started to suspect.

Steinbeck and road trips

Many of us go through a Steinbeck phase. Somewhere between pubic hair and baldness we go to bed with *Of Mice and Men* or *Grapes of Wrath* and head to poor little towns like Tortilla Flat in search of a wine that tastes like dirt. It's an awakening of a kind, where we question what we hadn't thought to question before, playing out the words in our minds and lives as if we had one version of imagination before the book came along and then have another. The hard lives contained within these books, told by an expert storyteller, forces many of us to realise our own shortcomings and insecurities because we never had it so hard. New scenes occupy our mind's eye, and as much as you gargle and hock you can't seem to clear the newly formed skin coating your insides. A good book can do that.

Inspired, you feel about for shifts, upheaval, to match these new visions. You find yourself searching out windswept places with an intense sun, craving blisters and being cooked by the biggest and fiercest sky you've ever seen. Properly crackled, you retreat to the deep shade of a sprawling, standalone tree, where lower limbs almost touch the ground. Long-range views from the tree are important as you mustn't be hemmed in by forest or buildings. A broken-down farmhouse and outbuildings are near but occupy the middle distance, and a driveway of sorts, no longer used by cars but by tractors from far away that come to work the land, provides you with a longitudinal line to spilt your scene into two hemispheres. If you were being hunted, you could watch as stalkers approach.



Landscapes are best seen from shade, which is why writers often narrate from the porch, or veranda, looking out. With a shaded forehead you don’t have to squint, so you see more, further and cleaner. Story spreads before you, broad and unimpeded. This is what Steinbeck has given you.

Not everyone goes to the places they’ve so vividly conjured; this has a lot to do with how much a person wants to taste and touch, sniff and sound out. Baby boomers tend to talk themselves down from taking these journeys, fantasising and festering about lost opportunities, given they have obligations like a dog to feed and a lawn to mow. Gen Xers teeter about whether or not to venture off, disciplined enough to salve the itch with balm in the form of rational excuses, having reached an age with a perverse loyalty to a student loan and a Tuesday night basketball team. Meanwhile, new adults, with their spongy and fresh brains, take their first leaps into the meaning-making potential of a road trip, because the great book they just read about road-tripping has converged with a new car licence burning a hole in their pocket. They pull up Google Maps long before checking their bank balance then head cross country in whatever car they can get their hands on, preferably one that looks as raw and authentic as the towns and townspeople they hope to find. Doorhandles that work are a bonus

and the only safety feature is a seat belt; stains on the back seat mean you're not the first to use the car as a story-maker. You smell the mission-brown upholstery the first few times you slide into the middle seat, but it becomes as normal as smelling your own beard after a while, which is fitting because both contain masses of pheromones.

When I first crossed the U.S., cinematic gas stations with bright lights and retro signs meant chewing gum, dodgy toilets and cheap junk food the likes of which I'd never seen. I took photos from the bowser because it's where we loiter for moments between each other's ablutions or indecisiveness. You have to rehydrate the car as much as yourself, topping up the radiator, petrol tank and hungover comrades every few hours. Petrol and pretzels become the commas to a shared story, as do three radio stations playing the same song at the same time, or finding ten bucks in a second-hand pair of board shorts you bought for a dollar at the thrift store. Once I stupidly, shockingly, travelling 50 miles an hour, climbed out the window and clambered over the roof to come in the other side. It's taken 20 years for me to realise I had a close call without knowing it.

Kerouac's *On the Road* came along when me and four stinking mates drove from New York to Seattle in eight days. The book itself was nowhere to be seen after I packed it, but its sentiments were with us as we weaved a northern late-summer route across the States. The memories of that particular week-long continent-crossing road trip are of beer, speeding fines, chicken wings, more beer and camping sites that weren't official camping sites. The dark, unknown places you pull into one evening look mighty different in the morning; you don't realise you're on a baseball diamond until little Johnny, in his pinstriped uniform, asks his giant dad in a high-pitched squeak, 'Who are all those sleeping men?' You hear this as you slumber, satisfied that you were called a man, then realise that you and your mates must move on with the least amount of fanfare in the next 30 seconds to save your skin. You own the situation as only young people can, getting to your feet and moving towards the car as if you've only been there for 30 minutes or so, picnicking. Nothing to see here, just early birds who took a quick nap after eating half a grapefruit. You reckon that little Johnny's dad did something similar from the back of a pick-up when he was young and footloose, and hope he walks the other way, smiling and shaking his head at the same time.

The previous semester, a road trip to Yellowstone and back from Vancouver during the week-long spring break ended up being substantially longer than a week. With an uncoupled gender mix, off we set in a golden van with a golden interior and Supertramp CDs. I imagined our group appreciated the same things, having conjured a batch of inspired, sexualised, free-spirited, life-affirming

humanisms from the same set of second-hand, dog-eared books. Although in truth, it was probably just me fantasising through books as much as I was, and really our group was just a carload of same-aged young adults with enough time and money to go somewhere else. Over the course of days and weeks you fall in and out of love with everyone in the car, noticing the attractive, unpretentious nuances of each individual. You wonder if they know you're looking at them that way, or if they know they have secret, bewitching ingredients that others notice.

Visions of Steinbeck and Kerouac filter through, especially on dirt roads that hide shit modern houses in an out-of-focus plume of dust. Rickety old farm houses sit smack bang in the middle of a cornfield, or a ploughed field, no longer attached to the world via driveway or electrical wire. Every so often the rotting wafts of bloated roadkill lap through the open windows, as does the wonderful sound of a train when stopped at one of the many humped-up railroad crossings.

Everyone's hygiene declines in a similar way as boys and girls rotate in and out of the sun as driver, shotgun and bitch. Musk is undeniable yet unnoticed on an individual level, given everyone stinks. A feeling of cleanliness returns when you ascend through a mountain pass, temperature plummeting as fresh air flows through the cabin across newly jacketed trippers. Foul air gets locked up or snap frozen until the bottom of the hill. After days of driving, you roll into an inspired town to get drunk and make memories.

Few streets define Steinbeckian towns, but the scene is unmistakable when you find it. Buildings are the most tired entities you've ever seen. People are old by nature even if they're young by age. Downtrodden, interesting towns that inspired the road trip now filter through the rods in your eyes as you adjust between the real and make-believe. The blend is rich and authentic, which is to say the towns are poor and desperate, hanging on by a fingernail. On the brink of a new era, stagnating, where new machines have cruelly and ironically outpaced the backbreaking work of flesh and bone, 1920s America remains here. Deep within a handful of seasons with very little rain, townsfolk sit in wait to be blown away by the wind, or pushed over to make way for a single, inefficient crop.

Time operates differently when you stop in these towns, probably because your inner cadence is recombobulating after you've subjected your eyeballs to middle-distance blur at 60 miles an hour for the last few days. Having gone back to a walk, or sitting, the day seems to take forever. I love it because you drink twice as much coffee, chew twice as much gum, and use your legs. Cheap wine flows, which is a must. Water must be put aside while in a Steinbeck town because it makes you feel too human, clean-thinking and hydrated. One must

reduce thinking to a fog, at least for the first 24 hours, whereby the onset of clarity at about 3 pm on your first full day in the town feels like a true awakening. You feel in that moment that you have allowed yourself to travel through time and touch another era. Your arms and legs and brain are acting out the words from a fictional character in a book, blurred between real and make-believe. Feeling what Danny or Tom felt, you search out a place to sit and watch.

I've been here before, through strings of words made into imaginations and scenes. Solo thinking takes over, especially in the mornings when the others sleep. Having made a significant dent on the second flagon long after I went to bed, my comrades are soaked to the core, something that at heart I detest because it ruins the next day, and the prospect of tomorrow is what our human mind loves most. I've seen half the town, albeit feeling like shit, by the time my friends finally spend money in their obvious hour of need, recovering over a mountainous plate of greasy food after a dollar-bill shower.

Then you leave before you experience anything normal or habitual, bending back into the car holding the largest milkshake of your life.

You funnel back to interstate highways from state roads and dirt roads and places where there are no roads at all, without having to leak into a water bottle. Stopping to kick stones about and take in the view is no longer an option because you've run out of time and need to get where you're going, already late. Besides, most of your stories are in the can.

When you pull over from a placeless chunk of highway at a service station just in time to pile out and unzip, you have in fact dictated the rest of the day in terms of eating, seeing, sleeping and talking, based on the chapter-by-chapter signposting of your bladder. Just as important, you've realised on the return journey that the wide town you're on the fringe of, having used the same offramp to get petrol, has a depressing sense of concrete prosperity about it.

Many hard-edged towns in the world exist like this one, trumping other towns over the years by having toilets and gasoline under the same roof, evenly spaced from another toilet and bowser 100 miles up the road. You cook up the easy metaphor that old towns, on bendy-hilly roads, with a steadily declining population of true believers that start and finish their lives there, are the equivalent to congealed oil. The concreted town of toilets and gasoline where you're filling up the car, dollar and gallon numbers rolling over, surrounded by giant cars and boulevards and estates, has oil flowing down the streets, moving all the parts about. In all the flatness and squareness and right angles of the built world you try to imagine where a stream ran, and what an indigenous stand of trees might look like. The squiggly outlines and bends and chaos of non-human environments are non-existent in the place you stand. An hour ago, back in

Steinbeck's town, a version of indigenous nature was visible from every spot you cared to stop, but not here. Hicks seem to live in a better, compromised world, unlike their highway-town neighbours.

Everything all of a sudden is depressing, because I know I'm part of the square town more than the bent one. Handing over the pencil case full of cash to Cat, who skips off to pay for the fuel, a massive utility pulls in next to me. Without searching it out, I see three long rifles on a gun rack. I'd only ever read about such things, or seen them in the movies. I must have looked a little too hard because the owner produced body language and a long stare that was puffy and alpha, although I wouldn't have remembered the interaction unless he said, 'I'd stop looking right about now.' His statement seemed to go against the theme of constitutional rights he was carting about, but it was advice that I followed, and the interaction soured the light-filled and social afternoon of good people and a window seat. As nice as Americans are, their bear hugs are as brutal as they are comfortable. Midwest affections seem split between cheap ammunition and a good season of corn. Americans are, I'd have to say, the most likable people in the world, though with an asterisk to their names that qualifies, they're the most likable people in the world with a gun problem.

Silence for the return journey to Vancouver is a good thing, as we transition back to lectures and assignments and laundry. Sleep gets made up around me with jumpers as pillows as I think for the first time that home turf, such as the small farm where I did the majority of my growing up, no longer sheds water down time-worn folds and cuts, and instead runs in straight lines down the side of roads, then through pipes and culverts, or runs as it does in the gas-station town made entirely of concrete, across evenly sloped tarmac, before it disappears into grills, speedily and coercively shunted into more concrete-lined drains.

Stands of trees sending out seed stock for thousands of springs have been replaced with greener, symmetrical versions to look like a place my great grandparents tried to recreate. Like my confused redheaded skin burning to a crisp even on the fringes of the driest occupied continent, trees adapt remarkably well living upside down on the other side of the world in such different dirt, often thriving like they never have before with so much sun and water, in a forever-mild climate. Animals that crossed paths at different times of the day when they were hunting or being hunted no longer make tracks there, replaced with the hardiest or prettiest and often uninvited counterparts. I hadn't noticed before that me and my kind have changed everything, and this is never so profoundly or easily seen than from the mirror of the road, where we witness a cross-section of the world.

Which is all a long-winded way of saying that being advised to look the other way in the doped-up air of a service station was a big moment. Steinbeck, in a handful of days, in a formative week of young-adult life, changed the way I see the world.

Steinbeck and eating

I will always be that road-tripper. Easy decision-maker, risk-taker, thrifty or broke, happy to go showerless for days, which turns into weeks. Many times I took to the road to see something new and inspired, in different, crap, wonderful cars, with different, wonderful people. That's what road-trippers do, set out to see someone else's sense of the ordinary.

But I no longer have time to say yes to road trips. Actually, I no longer get asked, ask others or create opportunities for either. I have a kid and my friends do too, and I'm long past people in my life having open-ended time at their disposal. Rowy, who would famously drive about the place in an old brown car with tiger-print car-seat covers, boot full of tennis balls, forever playing loud music and singing loudly, used to think nothing of taking long trips to see people, which tells you all about his personality: giving, willing, spontaneous. He never really sped behind the wheel, but he wouldn't stop, judging the length of a self-driven roady by the number of tapes he'd listen to, front to back. Rowy and I might hit the road again with the kids, or when we're retired.

Steinbeck lingers. Second-hand copies of his novels no longer take up the back seat of a car or corner of a duffle bag, but have come to rest on the bookshelf that represents my growing adulthood. Words and ideas from Midwest America have wormed their way into my home life, as have the actual books, which now take on dust, on a shelf, in a room I built. After 20 years of occasional alcohol abuse, hitting my head on tree branches and generally losing brain cells via biological degradation, I almost forget what lies within the pages of my favourite books, but I do remember that I like them, which is why they're still with me.

Even during my PhD study, where I had to pull apart key thinkers forensically, I never read books twice, at least not fully. My one exception is Steinbeck's 1935 novel *Tortilla Flat*. I'm dangerously close to reading it a third time as I sit here on the verge of procrastination.

I have no idea why my finger pulled *Tortilla Flat* towards me for the second reading. I might have been hungry, and suitably within a Mexican food phase that Helen was championing, but I was likely just looking for something, anything other than the screen in front of me, to take my attention. I was also wearing pyjamas, itself a sign of my adulthood, having only owned specific bed clothing for as many years as I'd been eating fajitas. Neat and orderly, in a lamp-lit room with a tepid cup of tea, clothed in pyjamas, I was likely the most comfortable and close-to-sleeping-while-awake I've ever been. Feeling the

satisfying nobs of sisal carpet through the caster wheels of a nice office chair, I read the blurb:

> Above the Californian fishing port of Monterey stands an old settlement called Tortilla Flat. It is inhabited by people whose blood is a mixture of Spanish, Mexican, Italian, and other assorted varieties – *paisanos*, as they are called – and no more vivid community exist anywhere on the West Coast. Some of them work a little, in the fish canning factories of Monterey, but one of the main activities is the cultivation of indolence in all its forms.

I read the first five pages without moving, testing to see if I remember things correctly. I do, but not enough to stop. I'm off, reading in the most productive part of the day when I should've been writing words for other people to read. Guilty Beau says something internally about an hour later, so I put the book down and go about packing for a ten-day sea kayaking program that begins the next day. I punctuate the packing by working through a pile of dishes, and pay a cluster of (Helen's) overdue bills that I've found in the fruit bowl (they were doodled-on, dog-eared, ancient looking). I brush my teeth twice, bookending breakfast and a dirty coffee.

The tattered copy of *Tortilla* is shoved in a waterproof pouch that I will take into the field, accompanying a notepad, a collection of waterproof A5 charts, cash, laminated card with emergency phone numbers, a variety of pens that don't work and a pencil that does. To be exact, *Tortilla Flat* heads with me to Hinchinbrook Island, in North Queensland, where I and seven students paddle 100-odd km along a degree of latitude up the side of Australia.

After morning bouts of paddling, when the sea is neat and combed, afternoons are spent at the base of a perfectly pitched tree to read. At night in the tent, rolling from one side to another, I read at right angles. Disciplined, I turn through 25 pages a day, half in the day, half at night, and no more, in order to finish on the last night of the trip.

Not so unexpectedly, the short expedition turns into a vision of the Midwest, as if right there in front of me, on a tropical Australian beach, I see how a corrupt stock market and the impurities of government 100 years ago and 12,000 km away conspired to fill small-town America with poor people. Hicks, who seem be the only honest people left, find their way through seedy in-betweens, animated by the throes of human redundancy in the face of industrialisation.

I've often heard people say that taking a book on expedition distracts you from the place you're in. Sure it does, but I can't fathom how that's a bad thing, it just loads you up with more comparison points to think about the very place we find ourselves. Animation of words becomes an immensely satisfying story

as the viewer of one scene and thinker of another. It's a hell of a thing to have two hemispheres of brain conjuring two hemispheres of Earth, oil and water, dirt and sand.

Reading in a tent evokes another layer of imagination. The micro-thin sheet of modern nylon is a time machine, a cocoon made possible through the ambitions of war and industry, fancy new resources invented in a bid to win, before such wonders leap into the everyday worlds of leisure and domesticated civilians. A tent is not just a tent; like all technological shifts, it represents something far more complex. And as I read, I reflect that the very beach we've pulled up on is experiencing sea levels rise, and above us there's a pockmarked ozone that lets in the fiercest sun in human history. Steinbeck's version of human ingenuity getting the better of us, you could say, is even more relevant now with a broader history to compare and contrast.

Inspired and depressed, making abstract links between two remarkably different scenes, I mooch about the magnificent UNESCO-listed shores of Hinchinbrook Island half expecting to see a dinosaur or a Ford Model T amble up the beach. With the ancient jungle at my feet and a staggering expanse of blue in view, mixed up with visions of Steinbeck towns and townsfolk, I feel a heady and abstract fullness. Reading a book in a spectacular place might well be one of the great indulgences of being human.

The meaning of food seems lost on many of the best stories nowadays. Hollywood barely mentions food in their movies, except where it jogs along a conversation or makes distracted actors gesture less or gesture more meaningfully. I suppose filmmakers believe we do so much eating throughout our lives that they can absorb the story of eating into the scenes before and after the snippets we eventually see. Until recently James Bond never really ate food, unless it was beluga caviar from the navel of Girl Number Seven, yet he pumps about the place saving the world, which requires an awful lot of energy. Helen thinks I'm very practical to think about Bond movies in terms of how little the hero eats. I think it's bad storytelling.

Steinbeck knows that hang-ups and hierarchies and health are all determined by eating and drinking. The latter, in particular, defines the life of Danny, the protagonist of *Tortilla Flat*, and his oddball comrades as they all take up residence in two houses left to Danny by his grandfather. The shenanigans of Tortilla Flat seem less about a town of hunger, given how resourceful they are, and more about wine, which is harder to come by. More specifically, the characters get drunk to absorb a town's worth of problems. Danny and mates are wine-soaked for days, and are in a perpetual state of being hungover. As they scheme to get more grog, the more they drink the less they eat.

When I stopped thinking hard about where I'd first read the book, I remembered. During my second reading of the final paragraph of the tale, when hero Danny throws the mother of all parties, I'm back in the bar, on the beach, lying in dust, salt-soaked, during my first crossing of Australia. I had read the book during my first crack at filmmaking, when I sea kayaked and road-tripped my way across Australia. It was mostly by car, but with enough sea kayaking to know that I had a lot to learn, and that I liked it. I called the eventual film *The Green Paddle*, based on my naïve sea kayaking skills, and I suppose, an expedition that was part of my transition from old-boy to young-man. I lost almost 10 kgs on that trip, wasting away beautifully as I got on with the job of doing more and eating less. Steinbeck and Danny were with me for the final week in Western Australia as I paddled east along the Recherche Archipelago.

Little wonder there was synergy at every turn: I realised as I finished my second reading of the book that the last time I'd cooked up *Tortilla Flat* images in my head was also when I was by the sea, paddling, on the verge of genuine adulthood. In my first double reading of a book I'd unwittingly touched on the experiential bedrocks of my worldview: paddling, thinking and eating.

Steinbeck and an idea

I return home from the Hinchinbrook trip with an idea. Front of mind is a self-experiment based on a small subplot in *Tortilla Flat* surrounding the story of the young, pregnant mother of nine, Senora Teresina Cortez. According to Danny, Teresina is a capable and resourceful woman who deserves a little help from the townies, so he and his band of free-loading mates agree to keep an eye on her.

At the time, California was rolling out a health program across the school network. Any kids who looked like they should be eating more, less or differently was called into the principal's office for a talking-to. The science behind this idea was a little thin, at least by modern standards, but the idea was to identify who needed a sandwich, and who needed it taken from them. Given it's a backwater, Tortilla Flat doesn't have its own nurse, so a contractor trained in child psychology is called in to check on every unhealthy kid she can corner. Teresa's eldest child Alfredo, ten, who most call Freddie, whip thin and nut brown, is earmarked for inspection.

'Freddie, do you get enough to eat?'

'Sure,' said Freddie.

'Well, now. Tell me what you have had for breakfast?'

'Tortillas and beans,' said Alfredo.

'What do you have when you go home for lunch?'

'I don't go home.'

'Don't you eat at noon?'

'Sure. I bring some beans wrapped up in a tortilla.'

Actual alarm showed in the nurse's eyes, but she controlled herself.

'At night, what do you have to eat?'

'Tortillas and beans.'

Her psychology deserted her.

'Do you mean to stand there and tell me you eat nothing but tortillas and beans?'

Alfredo was astonished. 'Jesus Christ,' he said, 'what more do you want?'

Mortified, the woman relays her story to a local doctor, who heads to the Cortez residence to see firsthand the ridiculous bean-based diet. On arrival the doctor is confronted with wriggling and screeching, crawling and tottering, half-naked children sliming about wildly on the floor. The doctor watches Teresina's elderly mother go to the stove and dip 'a great spoon into a kettle and sows the floor with boiled beans'. Instantly the squawks and cries of the children is calmed as

they move about the floorboards eating.

For two hours, the doctor rolls out a battery of tests on the children's teeth, skin, blood, skeleton, eyes and coordination to prove to himself and the local school association that the kids are suffering from horrendous mistreatment. In the end, bewildered, he writes his report to the authorities:

> 'Gentlemen, I tell you I have never seen healthier children in my life!' His emotion overcame him. 'The little beasts,' he cried. 'I never saw such teeth in my life. I never saw such teeth!'

As an eatie, I took huge delight when I read this in the tropical bliss of a salt-and-pepper beach, coconuts bonking together in the easy breeze. I was yet to eat breakfast, and had just downed a watery coffee with a satchel of sugar. I chattered my teeth and ran a dirty finger over the top row, thinking I was lucky to have such good choppers. I was completely and utterly charmed at the story of these kids eating beans from the floor.

Back at the farm I decide: I'm going to eat beans. I'm going to eat a lot of beans.

Eating my body weight in beans

I happen to like beans. Not as much as bananas or liquorice or half-loaves of brown bread from Baba A Louis Bakery in a side street of Rutland, Vermont, but almost as much. What I like about beans is that I've never craved them, not once, yet they always satisfy me. This is often the case for food you don't crave but also don't hate, meaning you'll eat them unthinkingly and easily. I don't crave air either, but I appreciate it at all times, especially on the odd occasion I actually think about it. I've never had a bad bean experience; some brands do tend to overdo the liquid-to-bean ratio, but for 75 cents a tin, I can imagine it's a fair enough part of their business case. All said, I think beans are a wonderful, forgettable, life-affirming pillar of humanity.

Always keen to remove moving parts within the web of what researchers say are 35,000 decisions I make each day, I concoct an idea to eat my body weight in beans. Unlike the giant cauldron that was forever bubbling away on Teresina's stove, I'll go with tinned beans, so that I'll have an easy metric to weigh and count as I go. For a sense of variety, I sex up the process by removing the labels of 200 mixed tins, so that I can lucky-dip my way through five to six weeks of bean-eating.

Naturally, most people I tell about the project question the premise. 'Baked beans? You're going to eat 200 tins of baked beans?!' No, not exactly. I am going to eat as many types of beans as the supermarket offers; ideally organic, with fewest additives and varieties so that I can at least have a variable sense of taste across the day. I will simply walk down the aisle of the grocery store and load up on black beans, four-bean mix, navy beans, baked beans in tomato sauce, Mexican beans, white beans, chickpeas (a bean!), and a few other

expensive oddities that would make the lucky dip feel like a lottery.

As with other kooky experiments, I challenge myself to do as little homework as possible, which was going swimmingly until Helen told all the women in my life about my intentions, all of whom have me answering far more questions than I thought possible, and all before I open a tin. Even ex-girlfriends on other continents weigh in on the idea, telling me how the stunt will nuke my gut flora within an inch of its life. While men and boys didn't give a hoot what I ate, or don't eat, the women informed me that a bean-only diet will reduce my sperm count, increase my irritability and encourage bad sleep, bad breath and a bad personality. Getting dumber is another possible side effect, but I get the feeling they liked this idea as I'd become easy to beat at scrabble.

Having listened to the advice, but thoroughly sold on the idea that even the stuffy old doctor who treated the Cortez children was willing to prove himself wrong, I charge my film camera and head to the local supermarket. For the counters among us, not all beans are created equal; tins and their contents are not the same size, nor is the fluid-to-bean ratio a universal rule. The very simple maths behind the idea is that I will eat as many tins of beans as I like for as long as it takes to eat my body-weight equivalent. I will eat around five tins a day: one for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and two as snacks. Based on my current body weight of 85 kg and the average weight of a tins of beans being 440 grams, I'll be eating about 200 tins over 40 days.

But I realise I will face a wicked conundrum. The more beans I eat, the fewer days it takes to reach my body weight, but in doing so it means I'll likely gain weight, thus increasing the number of tins I'll have to eat in order to reach my own increased volume. Whatever, that's Future Beau's problem. For now I have to start, because there are no front doors on the barn where I'm storing my stockpile of de-labelled cans, and I look like I'm stockpiling for a pandemic.

Tin 1

I crack my first tin of beans on a live radio interview, talking to the friendly Richelle Hunt in Melbourne's ABC studios. As I wait outside the studio for my slot I watch a few heroes pass by, questioning my stunt against their lifetimes of creative greatness. In wanders John Butler for a sing and a chat, then Deborah Conway, both legendary crooners who perform with heartstrings attached to their vocal cords. I don't introduce myself to them but do tell them both briefly about the silver tin of beans in front of me, with a spoon resting on the unopened lid. I guess I'm a little self-conscious about taking up valuable airtime next to them, experiencing for the first time in my in my life the strange feeling of impostor syndrome.

When Debra gets called in by the producer she departs with, ‘Good luck, Bean Man. Cool idea,’ and it’s nice to receive, at long last, an endorsement from a woman. I wonder if it’s because she doesn’t know me, or because she’s a freewheeling creative type and loves the fact that I’m following through with an unpopular idea. John Butler’s manager three-ways the conversation while John himself twangs and sings and chats in the next room. John’s manager is sceptical of the project and doesn’t give an ounce of endorsement, yet he’s kind and patient, as if he’s talking to someone who is not quite right in the head. In the space of five minutes I’ve reconfigured the pigeonholing of views about my stunt from men and women, which feels like vindication. That is, I realise it’s a stupid idea which has as much merit as it does genuine potential for self-harm, and gender likely has little to do with it whether or not people see it as a good or bad idea.

Off I go, sliding down beans between answering questions; four-bean mix to be exact, slurry and all. The slippery, easy meal feels extra good because I drank a little too much last night, and slowly ate a bag and a half of liquorice in the carpark an hour ago. Being soaked in vices beforehand helps me to get on with the job, thinking only about the power of beans for the next 40 days. I will consume them, and they will consume me. More than that, they will be me; I will be made of beans. The film we’re making of the exercise will be titled *The Human Bean*, which is precisely the point.

As my food-based decisions start to mirror an infant’s desire for milk and only milk, my only consideration is having a spoon with me at all times. I thread a yellow piece of string through a drilled hole in a spoon handle and wear it as a necklace. A supply of tins are stockpiled in various places I inhabit, which started out as an impressive 85 kg pyramid after the de-labelling process in the barn. It really is shocking to see what 200 tins look like when they’re stacked together. Hearing the faint echo of women folk in my life, I start to wonder if I’ll get tin poisoning, or if my skin colour will change into a meek orangey-brown, as if a fake tan has gone wrong. As I’m impatient and only ever open half a tin in order to get to the contents, I wonder how many times I will cut myself on bent lids and if I should get a tetanus booster. But I move ahead with the plan, caching the stores in my office, ute and shed at work. As a gunslinger is to their colt, I will never be more than a moment away from a tin of beans.

Tin 7

Not much happened between tins 1 and 7. I feel good, likely operating on deeply held stores of carbs in my body from 39 years’ worth of oats and wheat. What is momentous about tin number 7 (black beans in black slurry) has to do with a

bean of another kind, a bean which is actually not a bean: coffee (it's technically a pea). I notice an ever-present drone in my head, which I first think is the dicky air conditioner at work taking on an embodied hum, but it turns out I have a headache. Somewhat oblivious to physical harm for most of my life, my self-diagnosis is a horrendous shock. I am better at picking up my wife's dehydration, or the urgent need for an irritable student to void their bowels, than recognising cause and effect of the monkey-thumping rhythm of my head. True enough, I am getting dumber, although much faster than I thought, failing to acknowledge the obvious signs of caffeine withdrawal.

It gets worse; days three and four are horrible. Really horrible. But by the time I chug down tepid but pleasant tin number 16, baked beans in tomato sauce, I'm easing into a relatively headache-free life, cleared of my turbulence and the release from what must have been an unknown caffeine addiction that I've carried since 2005, the first year I started drinking coffee regularly.

Softening the blow is tea, my former great love. As I write, tea is making a renaissance in my life as the first thing I drink each day. Thanks to the bean experiment, and a plucky Cumbrian called Nigel who I spent ten days with paddling with in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, I now know that tea, and only tea, should be the first thing humans drink when they awake. Only uncivilised brutes drink strong coffee after waking up.

Tea is my only addition to the bean experiment. Work colleagues guffaw at the idea that my bean challenge is adulterated, as the milky tea provides me with a potent blend of antioxidant-rich, calcium-licked, blatant cheating. They're right, of course, but as I watch them munch away on quinoa risotto and leftover pizza, I figure the kids in Steinbeck's imagination at least had tortillas to hold their beans in place, and so my additional ingredient is a viable replacement to keep myself together.

I remind the most sensitive of my colleagues of the important fact that *everything was made up*: the book, my experiment and whatever cockeyed story comes of it. It was all whatever the hell I wanted to make it, irrational, dumb, pointless. Steinbeck and I live in a world of make-believe, and sure, there's an awful lot of crossover between reality and fiction. With close analysis, anyone would have problems with their diet. Worse is not having choice in the first place, eating poorly because that's the only option. Given I've been swimming in endless possibilities and choice since I can remember, my decision to eat beans only is about interrupting my status quo. I think many of us do make constant tweaks and run small experiments on ourselves. The difference is that I've told people about my experiment before doing it, which I'm starting to regret.

It’s about this time, day three of beans, that I stop being overly rational.

Tin 31

Steinbeck perennially paints a scene of summer, so it’s fitting that I’ve picked February and March for the experiment. By the second week, during a long stint of sweltering, beautiful days, I am starting to regret my decision. Every cell in my body that is not yet infiltrated with beans feels pissed off that I’m flailing about the place in the most productive sun-filled days in a lacklustre bean funk.

Trees are breaking their branches under the heavy weight of fruit. Days are rainless and the ground is firm. Other than digging a hole, which is a satisfying job I always finish when I start, my little property contains a banquet of unfinished projects. February is when I typically take time off work to finish the most pressing of the jobs, some of which I started the summer before. I normally bustle about the place fuelled almost exclusively on apples. Helen as my witness, I eat between eight and 12 apples a day, fizzing and burping, light on my feet. I gather fruit mostly from the ground, yellowed, ripe, bird-pecked and sunburnt gems that are fermented balls of sugar halfway to cider. Like parrots, possums and Mitsubishi drivers, all of whom I share the trees with, we get a little drunk during apple season. Small apples can be eaten in one mouthful. Showing off to Helen one lunchtime, I washed down a whole apple with a swig of wine. Half choking never felt so good. With the other pickers and peckers I rollercoaster through the day burning up sugar in bursts, then I’m early to bed so that another day, just like the last, can roll out with bang for buck as only summer days can.

The principal supplier of my summertime apples is a mongrel old tree that grows on my property boundary, on Shire land. Seeded by a passing bird, the rollicking old tree provides locals with a veritable ton of green apples in February and March. With dicky ladder and long-armed shears I’ve taken to trimming branches each winter given how many limbs bust under the weight of fruit, but six months later, under another mother-lode of fruit, high limbs bend into the path of milk trucks, giving its lower branches a shorn look, much like a haircut given to a badly behaving kid. Remarkably, a red apple tree 100 metres up the road takes over supply in April. For three months of the year these two trees could feed a small village.

Such wonders of summer are lost on me as I crack into a routine of tins, and not apples, sinking myself into a hole of high-protein legumes grown in Europe and Queensland, and not a glut of carbohydrates grown 15 metres from my kitchen window. Meanwhile the pumpkins are shelved under the sink, teasing me, and the spuds are at their peak, wilting away in the garden, making me salivate every time I go to collect the mail. Never mind the nectarine tree down

the road that is producing enough fruit to keep the local girl guides in jam until they're old enough to realise how good the tree is. The women in my life were half right; you're an idiot, Beau, you impetuous bastard, picking the wrong time of year to be fiddling with your diet.

Tin 80

Things are grim. Life as I know it is underwhelming. It's as if I've suddenly taken up a job that I don't like, found myself married to a woman I don't love, and am for some reason attracted to a bunch of outdoorsy, physical, worker-bee-type activities that I can't do. Colour has seeped from my pallette, and my world is awash with grey. A small slice of me enjoys this feeling of mediocrity, knowing how and why I've got there, proving the experiment's worth, while the other half wants to sit on the deck and eat an industrial-sized bag of liquorice and wash it down with a loaf of bread the size of a lawnmower. And beer: I crave beer, and I've never craved the stuff; the thought of a frothy stein of boutique IPA sounds positively brilliant, to the point of me not allowing myself to think along such lines because my mouth starts to water and I swear.

The human body's addiction to carbs seems very real to me now. Alfredo, Teresina's eldest, may have looked like an undernourished pauper, blowing about the place like a tumbleweed, but he was in fact the perfect blend of bean and rice, protein and carbs. By comparison, my bean-and-tea diet, depending on what set of tins my hand lands on each day, has me eating between 6 and 12 per cent carbohydrates (by volume), many of which are derived from the tomato-based slurry. Such is the great oddity of tinned beans as opposed to dried beans; un-tinned beans are incredibly high in carbs, but when they're soaked, tinned and liquified they become a shell of their former self. Good, but not that good, not like Teresina's brand. Having operated on a 50–80 per cent carb diet for most of my life, I'm in serious shock. My made-up version of Steinbeck's Flat is a dud, at least for now.

During the third week I fly to Western Australia to deliver a couple of talks on sea kayaking. I've dropped a few kilograms by this stage, and the lost kilos seem to have mostly comprised personality. Laughter is a non-laughing matter, and anything remotely ambitious, creative, fun or energised has become an abstract, distant idea. If I had the desire to read, which I don't, I'd at least be able to see what energy, creativity, and ambition look like in the form of words.

Being 'full of beans', I've come to realise, is a major lie in the ranks of common sayings. Tinned beans don't make you full of energy, they make you full of staggering banality and might well be the antithesis of energy. My usual heart rate for example, which is forever going up and down and would look like

a vast mountain range on an ECG reading, a topography that's normally full of rich animalistic life, is flatlining in the valley, walking along the banks of an ecologically dead canal that leads to a wide, boring, fishless lake.

It's been a rapid, then slow demise as I embody the very thing I've never really believed in; boredom. It's an unpleasant thing to think. On the morning of my trip to Western Australia, heading into my outdoor education job that's no longer outdoors in a 22-year-old car travelling on potholed roads listening to a radio host who annoys me, it's easy to get caught up in a funk. Windscreen wipers don't work properly when it rains, so they screech like the horrible radio host. It crosses my mind that the world is fundamentally shit, but having never thought such a thing before I deduce that being half full of beans has conspired against human joy. Leaving my car in the shed at work, I allow four hours to get to the airport (which is two hours away). Surely, on such a day, in such a mood, something would go wrong.

Nothing goes wrong, likely because I have nothing to do with the operation of train, bus and escalators. As I move through the airport dressed like everyone else in black and grey, people are none the wiser that my legs are made of beans. Each bony leg is around 40 tins' worth, adjoined to a bonier arse, unable to run anywhere near as far as their former, meatier selves. My legs look better, but they lack credibility.

Streaks of optimism do appear, such as the feeling of nimbleness as I make my way through the airport with my half full carry-on bag containing a rolled-up change of clothes, laptop, runners and eight cans of beans. With time to kill my aim is to get checked for bombs because I'm curious as to the sensitivity of their wand. If I get pinged, I secretly like the idea of being interrogated by two officials; one male, one female (one good, one bad), in a secret room, with a stainless-steel table, black coffee and double-sided glass. This scene took place in Vancouver 18 years earlier, carrying around the same bag – back then it smelt of dope after an all-night departure party. The friendly beagle almost made me miss my plane back to Australia, unlike now when I have plenty of time for a bit of theatre. I never indulge this curiosity when I'm with Helen because we're likely running late, so I exaggerate a guilty-yet-innocent appearance when flying solo: lathered in sweat for no good reason, glancing about the place looking for half-domed lenses in obvious places. The whole charade means I have to look like a drunk person trying not to look drunk, a pretence that only exaggerates the fake non-drunkenness.

Security gets me before the bomb checker, although in truth the tins do the job for me, getting the X-rayer's attention.

'Are you carrying tinned food, sir?'

‘Yes. Eight tins of beans. I’m not sure what type of beans. Hopefully not black beans. I’m getting a little tired of black beans.’

‘Can you please take out the tins for me?’

‘Sure.’

‘Why don’t they have labels?

‘I like not knowing what kind of beans they are.’

‘Why all the beans?’

‘I really like beans.’

‘Really?’

‘No, although, yes. I’m doing an experiment where I eat lots of beans and see how I feel.’

‘How do you feel?

‘Six out of ten all day, every day.’

‘Fair enough. Have a good flight.’

I loiter, flirting with the bomb person as I pack my tins, but – nothing. A woman in a hurry, pissed off, gets checked instead. I spend an hour planning my presentation in an obscure wing of the terminal in view of a crew working on the undercarriage of an airliner. I’m well clear of the food hub.

As I don’t need any real energy for the next four hours, hibernating in the womb of an airport lounge, I feel okay. During the flight, my heart flutters when a sliver of fun emerges. Naturally, I will not be accepting in-flight food and will instead eat two tins of beans, splitting the flight into 80-minute bean-eating chunks. Wedging the camera between the seats in front of me, I eat using my spoon-necklace while conversing with the headrest.

My neighbours ignore the conversation, internalising their fear. The man to my left drinks wine. The woman to my right offers me a chunk of cheese, which is a lovely gesture, but odd given the conversation I’d just had with the headrest about my experiment, being on a plane, etc., which she heard. I say thanks but no thanks, and ask if it’s okay if her right ear is shown in my film. She says that would be fine.

‘I’ve never seen anyone bring a tin of beans onto a plane before,’ says the flight attendant.

‘No? Well, Shane Warne is a hero of mine, and I hear that that is all he ate when playing cricket in India. I’m much the same when I fly to Perth. I don’t trust food from the west, and I’ve never really liked plane food.’

‘Really?’ asks the attendant, laughing.

‘No. I love plane food, and the sandwiches look excellent.’ Then I trot out the explanation I’ve trotted out for weeks: ‘I’m doing an experiment in which I eat only beans . . .’

I spend two days with terrific, warm, welcoming people in Busselton, talking shop about sea kayaking and expeditioning. The place is magnificent, a sublime 28 degrees with a puff of wind. The endless nut-brown coast with seams of green is an almighty mix of health and vitality, overlooked by the biggest sky you'll ever see. Yet in the most simplistic and perhaps abstract of ways, the world seems one thing and me another. As a feeling of six out of ten becomes entrenched the meaning of life is genuinely up for grabs. Things are grim.

Tin 121

Feeling light is perhaps the most liberating sensation anyone can feel. I don't often feel light. I mostly feel thick, as if a flesh wound would never hit anything important, only slicing through a nice slab of muscle or fat. I'm no Stallone or Schwarzenegger, heavy brutes with the thickest of hides, fending off deep wounds with an impressive amount of bleeding. But I'm usually more like them than ballerinas or rock climbers. They flit about like small birds, or summer grass, blown around in a stiff breeze. Yet here I was, feeling light for the first time in years. Horrible, but light. I have lost 6 kg by this point, and while my running legs are atrophying, my torso has also lost what felt like a pulpy layer of skin, as if I'd been walking around caked in mud and a passing monsoon had slimmed me down.

I take to climbing again, which feels like the most seismic day-to-day shift in response to being a man made of 75 per cent beans. Unlike running, which requires I churn away for longish chunks of time with a high heart rate, sweating profusely, thinking little about pace and time, on autopilot, climbing is shorter and sharper and more immediate. Beans have made me shift gears.

I work on several easy routes that are covered in jug-like plastic holds, bolted to a U-shaped section of our university gym. Bedded in soft tanbark with a longwinded risk mitigation sign overlooking the death-defying space, I spend 15 minutes every other day doing as many laps as my unseasoned muscles will allow. Rather than covering endless distance over ground, it's nice to be going up, even if only a few feet off the ground, and it's nice to be powered by my upper rather than lower half. I'm not setting the world alight with my climbing, but it feels good, and different, and a tonic to replace the tonics I've banished myself from drinking.

Tin 150

I chug tin 150 like you would a cold glass of water after digging a hole. Several navy beans, which are the most common type of bean found in baked-bean varieties, jump ship because of poor tin-to-mouth coordination, but are held in place with a thick coat of tomato sauce and a sideways kink of beard. If I were to

look at myself in the mirror, I'd see an unkept, careless slob of a man who needs to consider Helen's eyeballs more. I think about having a shave, showering and drinking a tall glass of water – all neat and tidy things to do, but instead go for a run in yesterday's running shorts, which are still wet from sweat, and smell twice as bad as you'd expect. If medium-paced and slovenly is the new me, then so be it.

I'm rewarded by my commitment, because my legs actually feel like they have something to give, not necessarily because they do, but likely because there's less of me to carry about and a lovely tipping point is being struck between wattage, weight, fitness and timing, conspiring to give me something that feels like running. What it means is that I've started, ever so slightly, to convert beans into energy. Let me rephrase that; my body, being a remarkable universe of moving parts, is somehow turning beans into what feels like a dusting of burnable fuel.

Great hubris is at play, because I have a daft conversation with Mitch where I say, half joking, but knowing what it means, that I'll complete a 50-km trail run on the final day of the beans experiment, slurping down beans as I go. Metabolic witchcraft aside, I would have needed to train, and here I am, on about my 15th run of the experiment and only now starting to feel like I can run around the block, let alone an ultra-marathon, which is nine days away.

What makes this run so daunting is that two weeks ago I slipped away on an imaginary vacation to a small bean-shaped island. The island itself is the size of a tennis court, so running wasn't really possible, and as I was on a vacation exercise wasn't a priority. Even so, I took along an old pair of running shoes just in case. One day, my runners and I reminded myself that I needed to conjure beans into energy. Things, you will recall, were grim.

I took to religion; specifically geographology, which is a made-up religion that talks about the human body as if it were hemispheres, much like Buddhists

suggesting a mind–body split. Northern continents are the head, organs, and arms, and the lower half is an unsplit Gondwana land in the shape of legs. Sure, the northern half, much like on Earth, holds lots of the important stuff, the decision makers and good-looking places, but it's the southern half that does most of the physical moving.

My idea is to convince the important northern states, which are being convinced by a large portion of the northern half itself – preaching to the choir, you might say – that my southern hemisphere is able to be powered by beans because that's the only fuel available to me. If beans are it, then beans it will be: the ultimate (only) running fuel, regardless of how far I can or can't run.

Having returned from bean island, I am headed to the bush to feel out this new bean-based religion. The beginning starts okay and even halfway through the run I feel good, which is half a lie that I am able to convince much of my body is true.

Since tin one I'd been slogging out 30- to 40-minute runs, to demonstrate just how bad running feels when I don't have rice or oats or bananas or anything other than goddamn beans fuelling me. Five kilometres of thinking how pretty ferns are is a little different from 50 km in the bush, with others, in summer, with almost no training. Lying to myself, hoping that a whole bunch of self-talking crap, and a few dogged runs, will get me across the line, I continue on the run.

Tin 194

Kilometre 32 is easier than kilometre 22. I don't dare question how or why this happens, I just keep going, thanking a canopy of gum trees for some delicious shade. I suspect the 32 mark is palatable, even enjoyable, because 22 was after half a dozen kilometres of mostly uphill, slippery, wild terrain. By 10 am, having started running at 7:30 am, all I've eaten is 1.8 tins of beans (.2 down the front, in the beard and hair, and one solitary bean in my ear).

When the 32-kilometre aid station emerges from the mega-forest in a clearing at the end of an old tramline, I smell woodsmoke from a camping fire, and hear music playing from speakers. People mill about, clapping and talking and having a heck of a good time as the runners come and go. Tin number three for the day, which I chug at this point, is the second last of the experiment, and I reflect that I'm probably closer to my body weight by now with all the sweating I've done. I cut my nose and finger on the tin, which at least means I don't think about the beige legs I'm carrying about.

It's hard to describe what the next 18 km feel like, or the 30 minutes of sitting in the shade at the finish line. My friends Jodi, Kelly and Mitch hand over a basket of fruit and liquorice and beer, stuff that makes the world spin. It is

perhaps in that basket of goods that the experiment holds a true insight; I realise I’m in no rush to eat it. I no longer crave, which is a hell of a finding when you stumble upon it.

Over the following few days I eat a bounty of foods that are not beans. Life goes on, endlessly – at least, for a while it does – whether I’m eating beans or not. Six out of ten days still come and go, turning easily into a sevens and eights, or a different version of a seven when it starts out good then goes bad. Then there are great days, or days where something remarkable happens. Rarely are my days bad, so in some respect being uncomfortable is more remarkable than feeling good.

In the weeks that follow the bean experiment, I feel revitalised and refreshed with greenery and the sugary bang of fruit, rehydrated with all the right kind of juices in large pots of veggies. My running legs slowly return to a peppier state, my vices of coffee and wine flow, and life is good, but in so many ways comfortable is just another form of discomfort – with as many inputs, just less complaining.

I still love beans – and yes, the experiment was flawed, but that should be the nature of experiments, because doing it right all the time would mean we wouldn’t learn a thing.

CHAPTER 6
A MILE AN HOUR

Office worker

As I've told you, I got a little fat during the writing of my PhD. About a year after handing in my thesis, Thursday morning, springtime, I saw a reflection of myself that shocked me. In the five or six seconds my computer screen took to warm up, remaining black, dusty and fingerprint-smeared, a man I didn't expect to see looked back at me. He was an office worker.

Reflective surfaces that aren't mirrors tend to do that, reveal what others see, and not necessarily what your mind's eye imagines. And it's different from a mirror as mirrors are in controlled spaces where you expect to see yourself. A shop window can reveal that you don't look like the person you think you are, want to be, or once were. In the moment, egomania takes things out of proportion as you turn on yourself, loading up connotations of vulnerability and mortality, of legacy, in a matter of seconds. No longer embalmed in a self-serving, happy, autonomous bliss like an alone Matt Damon eating potatoes on Mars, you all of a sudden feel endangered, hunted by a better, bastard version of yourself.

There are scales to how much your moment of reflection makes you change. Revelations can expose what you haven't seen for months, or years; narcissistic, clichéd Hollywood metaphor. The moment is, after all, a culmination of every second of your life to that point. I live with few mirrors in my life for this reason, scared of an increasing past. But then I nude up, literally, constantly changing between some form of work apparel into scant running kit, so I glance down and along myself, hugging my torso with appraisal, knowing fully well where my body's at, where it's come from, and how it feels on a scale of good to bad. But for that particular moment as I saw myself in the computer screen, completely clothed, I knew I couldn't un-see my office-worker self.

Just as suddenly you get on with things, distracted with a long list of to-dos: responding to a student who has a broken ankle, writing a bio of yourself in the third person trying to sound one-part Socrates one-part Steve Irwin, teaching, drinking tea, buzzing away in a honeycomb building. Avoiding the peak-hour line-up for the tea room appliances has me reanimating leftover catering at mid-

morning and afternoon timeslots. Frozen triangles of sandwich are pressed long and hard in the jaffle maker. Oozing cheese makes the six-month-old sandwiches perfectly palatable; all you taste is cheese-infused bread compressing the other limp, warm and wet ingredients, which neither taste, titillate nor offend.

Life is perfectly good, and it's always balmy at work. The environment is pretty much a womb: 22-degree carpeted hallways; rooms with bottomless tea, coffee, milk and fruit in a bowl; clean toilets; hot water in taps and frozen sandwiches. Short of providing a few sunlit vitamins, human habitation of the fourth-floor office space in a mega-university has life down to a fine art. I'm not sure why I leave each day – for a while there during a breakup, I pretty much didn't.

Obvious in my reflection, in perfect alignment with the fat beard, thick face and bulkier clothing, was the realisation that 30-something office-worker Beau was going about life very differently from his 20-something version. I hadn't noticed before then that I was using a new hole in my belt, but knew it when I locked eyes with my computer screen self. Granted, much of this thickening and sitting is an expected evolution, but I didn't think it would come so soon.

I knew, for example, that the intensely static final ten months of the PhD process was unhealthy, but I was willing to be my own sacrificial lamb, knowing that comebacks are half the fun. The very stories of this book, and this particular chapter that cleverly brings them all together, is in some ways a story of atonement, figuring out that life on the other side would give my mid-30s body and mind a bloody great reminder that there are good and bad ways to spend the hours of my day. I spat out the other side of my PhD thinking I would never, in my life, live such a one-dimensional day-to-day. And yet here I was.

In the fluorescent wash of the computer-screen scene, an incredibly different set of moving parts presented itself in that five-second image. Daily splits of time, space and a coffee-smudged list of to-dos meant my current worldview had defaulted to an impractical and organised algorithm of insidedness. I represented less-than-wellbeing, a clean-handed man with the worst RSI injuries of my adult life. Hatless, which for most of my life has meant a feeling of nakedness, I felt unruly hair flop about in a stream of manufactured air blowing in from ceiling ducts.

In becoming the heaviest version of myself, air-conditioned, whoring myself to all day tea and coffee, eating frozen sandwiches, my identity in that one image was no longer what I hoped it was. It was as if I'd moved to the Northern Hemisphere and not realised that the sun arched in the southern half of the sky and not the north. My spots, defining me like those of a big cat, were fading.

A certain kind of in-between

A version of my curious self returns when I leave the office building. It always does, but with the sun not far off the horizon, it leaves only a small wedge of the day to tap into my preferred state. I walk 2.2 km to the train station, down the hill via a few suburban streets. I love the walk. It's the slowest walking I do, thinking about everything and nothing, completely distracted. I pass pivot points of front gates that somehow make a gate work at a skewed road pitch, the flaking paint of a renovator's delight, and the veggie-patch nature strip of an industrious gardener. This all means I've left work at my desk between two slabs of laptop. I think about what I experience.

By the time I see the train station I wonder if I have credit on my train pass, and if I should go via the fruit shop to buy an apple. I eat too much fruit, but figure it's not a bad habit to have. Against the grain of commuter traffic, I enter a train that was moments ago chock-full of city workers. As I've mentioned before, I've never in my life wanted to sardine myself in a train, breathing almost sexually down the ear of a stranger, so I reverse what I did that morning by going against the grain by sharing a carriage with a dozen, maybe 20, like-minded commuters. I return to my morning thoughts when I see my reflection in the train window. It seems there are two clear, very simple themes to my newly reflected self; I've become an inside person, and I'm less physical than I once was. Cloaking these two new identities are the same clothes that 20-something Beau was wearing and a thick wild-man beard. Very little skin is exposed. If office life was strictly naked, maybe I'd compare myself to others, but in the bearded, red-headed, civilised way of covering up, I was sailing through my heavier phase only really knowing it myself.

Home

Tilt your head back and look down your nose. Squint so you can see the tiny, downy hairs of your skin. If you're lucky you'll see nose hairs overshadowing the smaller hairs, giving the whole scene a sense of scale, as if the downy hairs are shrubs and bushes and nose hairs the forest. A decade ago I didn't do this, likely because I was too young to have any nose hairs, or not wise enough to think about looking. Instead, as a boy in search of manhood, I went about looking for fuzzy forests on distant, geographical, real horizons. Twenty years later, with the occasional nose hair making itself known, coinciding with a willingness to be odd, I tip my head back to reveal that the forest ridgeline of my nose looks remarkably like a distant, spectacular mountain range. The micro all of a sudden looks macro.

Sentimentality has crept in at the same pace nose hairs are coming out. I start to care more about the small things in life because I notice them, as if slowly deteriorating eyes have recalibrated from a long-range view that until now took all my attention. Objects around the home – for example, a particular fence post that wonks in one direction, or a pile of rocks that have been gathered, moved and moved again – all have a sense of future purpose, and can be artefacts and anecdotes of exoticness if I think of them that way. Not because they're special ingredients or spaces, but because they've become an object of focus for me.

My home study, which is really just a table in a room that we don't sleep in, and will soon house the sweet-smelling stuff of a child, is really where this penultimate chapter starts and finishes. The small room provides a counterpoint to my work office because a) it's where I write, b) has a window that looks over the paddock and barn, and c) reminds me that my barn stores tools, broken things, projects, camping equipment, shoes, bikes, axes, etc. My work office represents a place where my fingers pogo across a keyboard and my eyes look 70 cm ahead for hours and hours as I drink too much tea and coffee. The home study is a version of my office, only colder, where I buy my own milk. And the barn, unlike the hallways of work, is where things can be broken, adjusted, fixed on the spot and brought back to life.

Clearly my two desks have a lot in common, although I do sit on a green Swiss ball at work, which pleases the cleaners as they're easy to clean around. Both desks are sending me blind and giving me bad kinds of repetitive stress injuries. The big difference between them, however, is what I can change. At work, I can hang a poster and adjust the blinds, but I can't change a light bulb, the temperature, the colour of the walls, or open a window. Completely out of

the question would be to help the tradespeople working constantly, safely and slowly at various jobs. Something is always getting fixed at work, which makes sense as most things work only most of the time. No, the practicalities of my job at the university involve me sitting behind a computer screen, thinking, writing and occasionally teaching. Every seventh full moon I get to go into the field and talk to people around a fire or from the middle of a canoe, but such excursions are becoming endangered. I really like my job, but very little of my office world is changeable by me unless it's via my fingertips or an occasional, animated (trying not to swear) lecture.

Home is a space that I can alter in a million and one ways based on a million and one influences. This is somewhat obvious, I know, but my point is that home is a place of impact based on alterations, and work seems to be a place of impact based on implications. Put another way, work is often about being a middle person shuffling ideas, emails, lists and content from one source to another, while home is on the frontline, turning wood into a fence, water into pumpkins and grass into hay. I like both places, but I seem to get fatter when spending time in the latter. This is likely the case for all of us, which is why I'd like to change my particular version of it.

I'm constantly thinking that there has to be more to an adult's working life than eat, work, sleep, repeat, doing much the same thing, especially when it means being boxed up to think and write about the practical things I'd rather be doing. It seems the better we get at something the less of it we do, taking up our craft via the one dimensional capacity of a screen. My other voice argues back, saying there's nothing wrong with a neat and tidy, eating and repeating, thinking about outdoor life instead of doing it, especially when you can run or pull or spin at any time of the day while watching YouTube on a gym device that costs as much as a new hip. There are, in effect, plenty of positives and viable physical outlets in my current everyday breakdown.

Besides, I secretly love habits and routine, finding myself constantly using one spoon and a particular cup, and wearing the same four pairs of undies on high rotation. Most of the stuff in our kitchen is used by Helen, or the occasional visitor, and there are parts of the couch I've never sat on. At work, running in the deep shade of a room on the wide rubber band of a treadmill with the fan on is utterly fine. My peeve with routine and repetition is therefore riddled with contradiction, resting squarely on my shoulders as a conundrum of perception. I know this.

Conflict is then an act of redefining what might be considered mundane home and work life into something more meaningful. Or, better yet, making small tweaks and adjustments that make the regular and habitual repetitions seem

different and purposeful. For me this means peppering my routine behaviours with the use of my body. And not, I'd stress, through segmenting chunks of the day to hit the treadmill, or kettle bells; I want my energy to end in something, be it a hole in the ground, or footfalls that make me think about the human condition, and not the time, distance, and calories I'm burning. I have no beef with the ideology of office life, only what it says about my physical body. More to the point, what it says about physical demise if I type one more email.

Pouring porridge scum on the same spot where I leak from the deck is a great example of balance, and weirdness, and systems, right under my nose. Something seemingly lazy, disgusting, uncouth and noxious comes together to reveal meaning. Beyond all else, it's unusual, the kind of thing you can only do on your own patch. At least it has meaning and is interesting to me, and that's important, having a small plot of land and a small home, brimful of moving parts, with immense personal and physical potential. You could say that after so many years of going to other places to do things, to test myself and experience whatever it is I was looking for, with work most certainly being a part of this otherness, it seems blindingly obvious that one location can now take over in terms of satiating a primal desire for physicality and mindfulness. After seeing a bit of the world, my backyard has become just as worldly.

The block

About six months before handing my PhD in, I looked out the window lusting to be outside and actually said the words, ‘Fifteen more minutes of writing, mate, and you can go for a short run . . .’ – a short pause, thinking where a short run would take me – ‘around the block.’ I felt a little self-conscious saying such a thing, which is rare, because I always talk to myself. Instead, I recognised the task was a little embarrassing, having never in my life arranged a seven-minute run. I felt fraudulent perhaps, like I was convincing myself to buy an eight-minute ab machine in eight easy-to-make payments.

After writing a lukewarm paragraph about widows reflecting on their dead adventurer husbands, I laced up for the mile-long lap around the block. I paid attention to a few cows and the novice flight of a young magpie, thought of a half-pleasing itch beneath my waistband and licking my lips made me realise beard hairs were curling into my mouth, and before I knew it I was back at the barn. Bloody hell, smack me in the face – how novel, the ridiculous notion of a seven-minute run! With barely a sweat, I was chuffed, I think, because as if a great whale was breaching in front of me, I’m not all that sure about what had just taken place. Nevertheless, having broken up my PhD writing with a famous mile of travel, somewhere between real and make-believe, I returned to my desk.

It worked. As if feet and hands exchanged cadence, words trotted out like juiced-up footfalls. I took up the inner conversation again: ‘Beau, knock out a fast, crude, idea-dumping 1000 words . . . then run another lap.’

I scrolled through to a section of thesis that I could let my mind run unhinged, somewhere I wouldn’t need to hitchhike using other people’s ideas, and let rip. Seventy-five minutes later I produced a few pages of grammatically poor hijinks, releasing me from my own grip. Still in my running shorts, I set off for lap two.

Thrilled with my reward mechanism, and amazed I hadn’t thought of it earlier, on my second lap it dawned on me that I could supersize this idea and run a lap an hour, for 24 hours, which would be almost a marathon. The all-day stunt, I imagined, would be reward for finishing the thesis. Rather than write between laps I’d set upon all the unfinished, dodgy, ad-hoc, swinging-in-the-breeze jobs that I’d seen from my study window during the writing process, calling to me like Odysseus’s nymphs. And there it was, a measly run between bouts of questionable writing had morphed into something with a bit more oomph, skill and intent.

Assemble team, try not to list jobs

I dot-point the idea of running a single lap around the block, every hour for 24 hours based around doing fix-it, make-it, perennially put-off jobs in between. I've become a stuck record on the benefits of loose planning. It must not, I remind myself, look or feel like my calendar, a place of colours and grids and double bookings and half-valuable time wasters. Time needs to take on the simplistic breakdown of needs, then wants, then demands – in that order. A large vat of soup for example is a need, and will give this project sustenance; fixing a stepladder that's sat on a nail in the barn, and another shed before that, and god knows where after it actually broke, is a want because I'm sick of not doing it and doing it will bring me a decade's worth of gratification; while crafting up a long-awaiting outdoor table is a demand because Helen wants one and I refuse to buy one.

I also know, as a daily list writer, that listing jobs, as opposed to doing jobs, is easy. I have to save myself from myself, knowing that the bigger my list becomes, the less of it I'll get done, so I stop myself after writing, 'Big soup, Stepladder, and Helen-table'. I want to float around on a cloud of serendipity where my to-do list can change at any time based on the need-want-demand hierarchy.

I overlay the thought that simpleton tasks should be mixed with crafty know-what-I'm-doing tasks. My regular workday at a computer is structured in much the same way, with submissive bureaucratic work that hurts my brain punctuated by easy emails to students. When I'm bleary-eyed, which is concerning when you notice it, which isn't often enough, I walk 382 paces to the gear shed and straighten tent pegs which are horrendously bent by students who have no idea how to use them without bending them. Against my better judgement I've often

sung praise to peg-benders because the opportunity to straighten them back breaks up my computer-bound day with a small and simple purpose. Like a lap around the block, the tent pegs save me from myself.

I talk to Mitch and set a date. Then Chris, who’s available. Team assembled, we’re on.

Miles

While I think it's becoming less common for people to feel how their body–mind counts and deciphers distance, humans still seem fundamentally attached to denominations of the mile in the way it tracks life affirmations. To practise a skill is to get miles under the belt, which is another way of saying that self-efficacies are either good, or miles off. Milestones are no longer large chunks of rock set along trails to tell wayfarers the distance between points, but are the moment of our lives, or even our day, that steer us socially and hierarchically. Joining the mile-high club is not just elbows and knees in a confined space, and not technically true given the deed is done from five miles up when the seatbelt sign has gone off, but it does say a lot about our sexed-up minds thinking in mile-sized manoeuvres. More than any other unit of measurement, the mile is a chunk of measurable meaning that goes well beyond the lineal gauge of distance.

I recently gave a presentation to an association of orthopaedic surgeons. Afterwards, when Helen and I sat with a table of them for a meal, I mentioned to my tablemates that Helen is excellent at estimating weights and measures, which she is. Helen guesses correctly 65 per cent of the time how heavy a strange or disproportionate item is, or how hot or cold the day may be. While I beat Helen at Scrabble at roughly the same rate, we agree that Helen is statistically a better person than I am given Helen will soon learn not to open up the triple-word scores and will thus beat me at everything.

I passed on these compelling facts to the other six people on the table. Impressed with the quirky assessment of my wife, and given we sat on the 88th floor of Australia's tallest skyscraper, the president of the association asked Helen for an estimated height between where we sat and street level. Helen oohed and ahhed, which was a bad sign given she's always cool and confident with her measuring. 'Nine-hundred metres high,' she said weakly, loaded with ambivalence. Needless to say, Helen was miles off, the altitude having messed with her metric brain, tripling metres instead of feet when estimating each of the roughly nine-foot floors. Like many of the teen, 20- and early-30-year olds out there who happily bandy around the idea of the mile, Helen entertains the concept of the measurement, but doesn't really know what it is.

I have since stopped publicly announcing that Helen is exceptional at estimating weights and measures. Given she is already a better athlete and humanitarian, and a generally more advanced biped than me, I'm keeping the imperial world to myself. I'm the son of a Luddite father who still thinks in feet and inches and a mum who coos about the weight of new babies in pounds, and I

spent lots of years in the U.S. buying giant tins of iced tea and bags of nails in ounces, so I think freely in both the metric and imperial systems. My only superpower in life – beyond finding things – is switching between them, not unlike bilingual speakers who grew up speaking to their Nonna and Nonno in Italian, their parents in English-Italian and their school friends in Australian. I'm in awe of such people who blend two languages effortlessly from one person to the next, hand-gesturing between one era and another. All I can do is correctly report how far I've run when I'm talking to an American or Aussie.

Englishman Roger Bannister cracked the fabled 4-minute mark for running a mile in 1956, which has been whittled down to 3:43 by Hicham El Guerrouj, who ran the lung-busting time in 1999, a time that's yet to be beaten. The mile is the last imperial running race left in the events bag of the World Athletics federation. For a punter like me, for whom running serves the purpose of an hourly spike in heart rate, directing blood to the legs and away from the brain, the mile's role in this project is to reset by body with fresh air, and to reset my mind by counting potholes and planting trees. I'll take roughly eight minutes per lap.

The remainder of my allotted hour will be taken up by barn-based tinkering, which will mean this day has the potential of being the fullest, most productive day of my life. Writing these words, having struck upon them all that time ago between chunks of PhD text, makes it seem like a worthy idea simply because it stuck, but it's also bonkers, and perhaps even boring, as the running and doing is much like I've done every other weekend since handing in the thesis. I remind myself that I must make it fun.

Only so much energy

I have a reservation. Running keeps me fit and healthy and happy, thickening my bones and making my heart beat strong, but it also burns precious calories that could be spent over a shovel, weeds or unsplit wood. I pass a gym on my way home from work and ogle at the fuzzed-out bodies behind pixelated glass and think about the huge number of calories that are burned up in the confines of a room that produces naught. Evaporating off the gym-goers' warm bodies are reps and calories and time, given over to mirrors as they're flat out on devices that go nowhere.

Running follows much the same principle. Burning between 500 and 2000 calories every time I run, I return home every other day as a sweaty mess to a cruel circumstance. In my absence, my job list has actually increased, the grass having grown, gutters filled with leaves and a doorhandle newly broken at the unbelieving hands of my wife. It's as if my running, like gym workouts, burns up calories in any other place than home, and sets me up to commodify the tasks I ought to be doing in everyday ways more often.

I do get it: home jobs can be a bore, and they're endless. Humans, particularly the over civilised ones, have a deep and smouldering desire to condemn daily chores as time-wasters. Incessant, so-called innovation rolls out in the form of kitchen gadgets and leaf blowers, or we simply pay someone else to do the task for us. But I've come full circle on home jobs, knowing that fixing and doing can be rewarding, and they must, because as soon as we invest in a log splitter it breaks, and we either learn to fix it, or farm yet another job out to an expert to fix it for us. Meanwhile you've taken up the axe again, which to me sounds like going full circle on a day-to-day task that will forever require our time, energy and emergent know-how.

Running could be lumped in the same basket nearly always an act of returning to the departed location – that is, it gets you nowhere, thus you've come full circle – and we only have a certain amount of energy to burn in a lifetime. I've come to question where, why, and how I expend all that energy.

A good friend, Sarah, told me a charming story about her grandfather once that I often remember. In retirement, her Pa would use a small watering can to water the garden. His children thought he was dim for not using the hose, not realising that his back-and-forward, filling-and-emptying process was both physically and mindfully therapeutic, giving him a long and gentle workout, and giving himself time among the birdsong and bugs of his garden. He knew what he was doing and passed on this anecdote to his granddaughter, who understood.

Sarah now copies her grandfather in meaningful ways. It could be that the entire ‘slow movement’ is about grandkids wanting to recapture the lifestyles of their grandparents, shaking their heads at their baby boomer parents who sped up the entire world.

I think ‘slow’ is actually a poor choice of word for the slow movement. You don’t go slowly at all, at least I don’t, because there’s so much to do. The math doesn’t stack up with the concept, as going slowly actually requires you to do a wider variety of tasks with more elbow grease, care and skill.

The gym user, like the runner, might very well have a host of jobs they could be burning all that energy on. If they don’t, they’ve set themselves up as a modernite who routinely pays others to fix-it or to sweat hard on a job that’s repetitive, physical or challenging. I get this impulse to farm out jobs. When I simply can’t bring myself to learn how to rewire the remote control that’s fallen in the toilet I do my best to clean it and take it to someone who knows what they’re doing. Like an unpopular piece of artwork eventually charming someone, there always seem to be individuals who like or are willing to do what others do not, perhaps because they’ve accidently found themselves to be expert at their particular trade. At heart, I know fully well that being an expert can be a comfortable perch to sit on, yet I never want to rest in such a place, or be this person, which is why this project of ‘A Mile An Hour’, and my late thirties, is about having a number of skills, being master of none. What this also means, given I’m in no mood to actually give up running, is at very least a I need to find a way to redefine how, when and why I run.

Laps 1–15: noon to midnight

In the week leading up to the big day I pick up 50 tube-stock trees (30 local *Casuarina equisetifolia*, known as she-oaks, and 20 native grasses), along with flour, butter, eggs, wine and beer for me and the crew. I buy screws and some industrial lights to illuminate my workbench. I throw blankets into the back canopy of my ute, where I hope to squeeze in pockets of sleep during the wee hours of the night. I tell myself to wash my favourite pair of running socks, but forget.

For those counting (which is most runners) the maths of a mile an hour for 24 hours, you'll notice this doesn't stack up to a marathon. I'm several miles short. Marathon distance is 26.219 miles, which is at least 26 laps of my block. So, I'll run three laps in the first hour, and then a lap of my paddock, which I estimate to be about 500 metres, at the 24-hour mark. At risk of being subject to emails for the rest of my life, given people are obsessed with marathon mythology, I'll be logging every inch of the famous distance.

It's a truism that jobs themselves don't take long but assembling tools and materials does. A furniture-fixing book I read once, written by a grumpy old man, said something along the lines of, 'Score and unravel the onion, don't cut the bastard', in reference to renovating things because there are always more layers, and sometimes rot, in whatever you're doing.

Schedule blowouts are becoming a bad habit of mine; a job to fix a leaking tap that I think will take two tools and five minutes turns into 17 tools and three hours. I hate jobs that prove me wrong, like fixing rangehoods. God, I hate rangehoods; cutting into walls, running power through cabinetry and rendered brick, being delicate around fussy stainless steel, rebating into ceiling cornice, all in hard-to-reach places where mice piss on you every now and again just for sport. I've never been right about the time or tools required to fit a rangehood, and hate using them out of spite. I remind myself to start this potentially overburdened project with slow, easy thinking.

I make breakfast for Helen and myself, which is a heaped pile of Weetbix and muesli cemented with suspect yoghurt, and drizzled with honey to mask the potential zip that bad yogurt gives off. Helen is onto me and, without sniffing or tasting the concoction, refuses the food like a child refuses Brussels sprouts (without trial), meaning I eat two breakfasts and the remainder of the yoghurt. The mass of calories springs me to life. When Mitch and Chris arrive, I crack on with lighting the fire while they adjust themselves from the car ride. I'm busting to get running, even though my noon start time is hours away. I remind myself

of the onion and sit back down to talk. Mitch reinforces patience, which is his natural state and also because he doesn't want to cheat the cameras out of the soon-to-start story, so I restrict myself to poking and prodding the young fire. Chris tells me about his daughters and his busy work life and we generally have a moment of calm before the wheels start to turn. We drink tea and charge camera batteries, chatting about the importance of authentically capturing what's about to take place.

Finally, lap one begins. Such a simple gesture of leaving the barn, past the concrete posts marking a line between my patch and Shire land, feels momentous like the start of a wedding day. If you give yourself a fleeting moment to recognise what you are doing, you realise how good it feels embarking on something that's been a long time coming. I'm attracted to firsts, like so many of us – the glorious starting points of potential. First steps, first turned sod, first nail, first sex. I remember my first paddle strokes in Africa after years of thinking and planning, delays and distractions. To start was to prove, and mean, so much. Visions of first steps can motivate you for years.

By the time I take my first right-hand bend, an impression of novelty surfaces without my having to talk myself into it. In my right hand is a shovel, which is fitting because the shovel and I first met by the roadside, vagrant runner meets loot, after which I carried it home for 30 minutes and realised how pleasing it was switching hands, pendulum-ing along. In my left hand are several plants. Thirty-five seconds into the run I stop on the poorly named council-owned 'nature strip', which was a strip of noxious weeds and bullshit before I came along. This particular chunk of strip is seed banked with unkillable hemlock and Californian thistle, which I see, and curse, from my kitchen window when I skim my eyes across my small plot of wine grapes.

I spoon out a shovelful of rich soil and make history by enacting the best form of legacy I know. Two she-oaks go in, stomped firm with running shoes and a final press of the palm. I slam the shovel in tight enough to hold vertically a few metres along the strip, where the next tree will go.

I run past my neighbour's house, taking two right-hand bends to get back to the barn. I have passed seven homes on the lap, with houses at various distances from the road. I can only see into one room of one house, as trees, distance and folds of pushed-up earth hide most aspects of other people's lives. I do, however, get insight into their outside world, which blueprints how they think: their lawns, grass, garden, fencing, sheds, trees, play areas, solar panels, burn-off piles, compost heaps, the temperament of their cows and the type of letterbox they use to advertise, or not, who lives there.

As a maker of things, I'm always looking for like-minded souls, which is

almost impossible not to find in a rural area. Maurice and Jacquie, the 94- and 91-year-old couple below my block, are remarkable humans. Maurice makes everything still, having welded up a new gate for his cattle yards recently, painting it rust-red and hanging it during the first hours of day, tinkering slowly and purposefully.

If the sick yellow of Roundup is splashed like cheap perfume, used to kill off greenery in hard-to-reach places, I tend to run a little faster. I even judge after-market add-ons that sit on cars like jewellery, telling me what people get up to, or wished they got up to, when they go places. You can tell a lot about a family, or so I think, by the look and feel of their outdoor presentation.

My block of land is not actually shaped like a square; it's more like a shark tooth, almost diamond shaped. I own one end of the shark-tooth diamond, another person owns the middle, and a family with horses and short grass own the opposite end. My corner, being the sharpest piece of the tooth, is where hoon drivers sometimes lose it going too fast in their hotted-up cars. I wandered down once with a cuppa and watched them dig themselves out. It was great viewing.

I plant three casuarinas and some grasses on each of the first three laps. Given this first stint covers about 20 minutes of running, I lather up a genuine sweat and get completely dirty hands, which means my face and shorts have also become filthy in my tree-planting haste. Dirty and getting dirtier, which means things are happening, feels bloody good. A certain kind of greenness fills in the majority of my running vision. Wintergreen actually, which is the greenest of the yearly spectrum. Winter grass has slowed to minority growth yet appears the brightest because it seems condensed, like undiluted lime cordial. Spring in these parts booms a few shades less green than winter in its heady growth spurt, much like a kid drinking gallons of cordial during a growth spurt, spreading energy far and wide. I think of this metaphor as I run, and wonder if I'll ever write it down.

Even though it's a mild day, there's always a nip in the air, especially in the shade, which I gravitate towards by habit. Not so much for UV shelter, because even I like the warm hands of winter sun, but to relax my eyeballs in the flinty streaks of light that poke me from a horizon full of giant-limbed trees.

When I return to the barn I grab the old slab of kitchen cupboard and a black marker to write down front-of-mind to-dos. Written in pissed-off cursive is 'pick up rubbish'. Having kept a peripheral check on my feet, as runners do, counting things, I noticed how many cigarette packs and beer cans were in the fringes of the road. Specifically, how many are clustered in the one spot, meaning serial offenders have made themselves a habitual place to turf. I tell myself, and the camera, that I'll take a backpack with me on lap four.

In the remaining 30-odd minutes of that first hour, I crack on with gluing up a

canoe paddle blank and sourcing wood for the outdoor table. Minutes fly. Good sweat embroils me as I work. Coffee swills down with chunks of liquorice. As cameras roll, I have no idea if this will make a good film, and in the moment I don't really care. A sense of constant busyness holds me in a rare state of presence.

Five minutes before the top of the hour (1 pm), I take a moment, perched over my growing list of to-dos. I continue to add jobs, the dam wall of ideas having well and truly burst. As I scan the walls and shelving for broken, half-made, or annoying things to do, the list-making is an eye-to-hand process. As a feedback loop it's immediate and satisfying. My broken and beloved stepladder I've carted around for decades, made in Year Seven woodwork class, hangs on a nail in two parts. It's genuinely the oldest thing I own that I've made. A wobbly chair hangs next to it with a broken cross member, snapped from someone having a wild time at our wedding – likely Tom, one of Helen's kooky friends who pretended to be drunk during an impromptu speech, which was hilarious. 'Drunk chair' and 'boy stepladder' go on the list.

Other jobs I conjure easily, having already failed at not thinking of them in the lead-up to today, namely small jobs that I've been putting off for too long, such as hanging two small maps that Helen and her friends Niki and Trent framed up for my birthday. Small jobs tend to do that, get put off for larger jobs. Yet it's the small jobs that make the biggest difference because they're the things we turn, make blunt, pull in and out all day, turn on and off and over the most. Such everyday-isms morph into sweet-turning doorhandles, razor-sharp knives, silky window slides, and latches and hasp coming together again as if the two sides of the San Andreas are uniting again after a billion years apart. Annoyingly, small jobs aren't always easy, and are thus put off, which is why I've been gearing up for these timely pains in the arse. Other than the purgatory of installing rangehoods, I remind myself that when I start pain-in-the-arse jobs, I more often than not enjoy doing them.

I decide to run clockwise for the first 12 hours then anticlockwise for the other half of the day for no other reason than I decide to, which pleases me immensely, given there's no right or wrong. The results are staggering. An old dairy, for example, is visible squarely and boorishly when travelling anticlockwise. Yet travelling clockwise, I see only a glimmer of the brick façade through trees and bushes, and it is this slim view of the dairy that makes me think about it. My old boss, Doug a radio-station manager, explained this phenomenon to me after we'd travelled home from a country fair and passed a new billboard he'd just commissioned. I hadn't seen the car-sized station logo on the way to the fair, even though it was seemingly obvious to the fair-bound

driver. Yet it was when we were going the other way, which meant the sign was further from the road, obscure and hard to read, that the sign became obvious, impactful and present. Red and blue logo seemed to emerge from the landscape like an animal charging towards you because you've startled it. The trickery, Doug explained, is that drivers, as curious animals, look further afield and are attracted by mid-distance scenes. I loved this idea of less-is-more and that curiosity sparks a more authentic, long-held response from humans. I've scrutinised advertising ever since, or nodded to a graffiti dirtbag who's chosen an obscure place over a vending machine. I've since realised why the mad men of advertising earn so much money, cashing in on human impulses we don't often think about. Seeing a hint of the old dairy on my run makes me think about it, and makes me want to see the rest.

Laps 16–26: Midnight to midday

Running each hour is the perfect circuit breaker to reset, decide what to do next, and evaluate what I was doing and how I'm feeling. I do the 1am–4am laps without a headtorch, drifting around the roads like a ghost. It is a spellbinding experience. Full-moon drama plays with the outline of things as clouds hide the halo one moment, fuzzing the world, then depart to reveal a completely crisp and identifiable landscape. My first night running, in pulses, torchless, is nothing less than remarkable.

Progress during the wee hours of night is restricted to checking on glue, stoking the fire, getting wood, piling up breakfast and lunch foods, and rubbing my hands together while looking at the workbench, plotting. Nothing is struck from the list as I quietly ponder. Where is the shoe polish and what colour are my boots, mid- or dark tan? Do I have picture wire, and if so, where the hell is it? I really should darn my jumper; darning seems like the most wholesome thing in the world to do. Do I use wool or cotton, and which knots do I tie?

Something can be said for circadian rhythm being our master and controller. Sunlight gives the human body energy. Having run my whole life between dawn and dusk, with the occasional inspired, downtrodden or fresh-off-a-plane night-time session, my body–mind thinks I'm an idiot when I'm running between the hours of midnight to 5 am – try as I might to override the resistance with food, positive self-talk, and swigs of homemade wine.

I've been here before many times, completely awake, covered only with a thin veil of tent, or with eyelids that are not quite closed. I often think of marooned mountaineers in my pre-dawn reflections, and their predicament at this hour on their particular mountainside, shelterless, awake, near-frozen, clinging to life by precarious rock and ice, waiting for the sun. It's other people's words I'm conjuring as I've never exposed myself completely and utterly like that, even if by mistake. Such deeply interesting ideas breed in me a perverse type of curiosity, and to some degree, desire. Cheating death is, I imagine, one of the greatest feelings anyone can have. In many ways this human force has dictated exploration and adventure. But here I am countering the adventurous psyche in my homed, well-fed, warm, controlled and easy environment, with equal measures of meaningful and pointless choice on offer. The black of night, which is never as black as that of a well-sealed room of a house, starts the slow and beautiful dilution to day. Life force returns as I think.

I get stuck into the idea of rulership. Who rules *me* – a bloody great star which is light years away, or my own pea brain? As the magpies crackle, my body –

legs, arms, head and everything else – comes alive again, raised by the sun. Laps 20–23 are the easiest and most energised of the whole project, rolling out as if I’ve started afresh on the back of two breakfasts, eight hours of sleep and new socks – which for me is a powerful combination equivalent to rebirth.

What I got done

By the time Grandad's clock chalks up 24 hours, the last minutes of which I lap the paddock in gumboots, my 42.2 km comes to a close. The gumboots are a salute to Cliffy Young, a legendary Australian farmer who used to run his sheep about on foot instead of by horse, tractor, or motorbike. It's likely the slowest marathon ever run. But I have done a lot, spreading my workload evenly between needs, wants and demands. Actually, that's a lie. Thirty-two of the 43 listed jobs got done, with three things still in play, such as the final sanding and coating of the two paddles. All 32 jobs ended up being wants, not because they were want-wants, like buying a new watch when your old one works perfectly fine, but because the luxury of choice meant each task was chosen over something else.

You can do a lot in 86,400 seconds, which of course we all get each day of our lives. My sense of presence during this one long day was a mix of now, past and future, which I like an awful lot. I would not want my days to be otherwise, oscillating between the direct experience of what's in my hands and underfoot, or drizzling down my face, blended with a conversation I had 15 years ago with a former boss on the return trip from a country fair.

There were times when I was utterly and completely absorbed in what I was doing, such as stitching up work pants with needle and thread, concentrating hard because it's the only option. Yet I can only ever truly recognise narrow-mindedness in the aftermath, as feeling it from within the moment would mean I'm not entirely there. Herein lies the conundrum of presence, as it seems to be a recognition that ongoing focus takes us away from all the other white noise of life, but acknowledging a state of presence is to burst its own bubble.

One way to achieve this state is by blending challenge and rewards in relatively equal measure to balance out the feedback loop. Such a process is hard to pin down, and riddled with contradiction, which is why I suppose it's gathered so much valence among people who like to think there are rights and wrongs to how we spend our time. I can say one thing about being busy, noodling away on a task that I'm enjoying, problem-solving and seeing progress: the tick-tocking sounds of death cease to exist. Great doers out there have called this 'purpose', which I prefer over presence, because it means something is getting done.

Good things spread

At the time of writing, over four million people have viewed *A Mile an Hour* on YouTube, and countless more via film festivals, non-sanctioned events and scores of social media pages. It's been illegally copied on Chinese versions of state-controlled social media, with great success. Six thousand comments tend to say similar things: that I'm a crack addict, a bit funny, inspiring, crazy to have shaved off such a resplendent beard, and look like a red-headed version of Ryan Reynolds, all of which I'll take. The film concept is, to date, my most well-liked idea, which surprises me, much like musos who can't believe a song they first hummed into existence on the subway rocketed to the top of the charts and is now hummed by millions of others for decades.

Another part of me knows precisely why *A Mile an Hour* resonates with people, because it combines a whole bunch of doing, told by an everyday Joe who isn't running particularly fast or hard, nor is he pained at doing something that is sometimes uncomfortable. Unlike a lot of running stories, I don't inflict my audience with regrets halfway through when an Oreo-sized blister appears from nowhere, or sleep deprivation makes me gang up on myself or the world. I've done this before and have learned to despise the idea of setting off on a challenge, then complaining about it until I'm done.

A young chap called Aaron, who has cerebral palsy, did his version of *A Mile an Hour* with his parents and friends after seeing the film. He sent me his whiteboard of to-dos, and his breakdown of neighbourhood laps that he completed on a running frame with the help of his dad. I welled up when I looked over the project, full of admiration. Such messages are as meaningful as anything I've ever experienced – bolts from the blue telling me I've inspired people to take action, in a particular way. Never expertly, but experimentally, and somewhat safely, because they know, like I've figured out somewhere along the way, that not doing anyone else any harm likely does you the world of good.

CHAPTER 7:
HOME

Six months of May

Halfway through writing this book, May came along. First the month, then the child. May Mary Miles, named after Helen's grandmothers from both sides. Life as I know it changed in a moment. Actually, it changed slowly over nine months to the day, then at a medium pace for 11 hours before all-of-a-sudden a few seconds brought new life. A squirming, purple, dimple-cheeked infant getting plonked onto a table for a rubdown, then plonked back into Helen's arms, was the most meaningful moment of my existence. Seismic feelings took over in what was nothing short of a shocking scene of blood and goo. I choked back tears that I should have let gush, allowing myself a release on behalf of my heroic wife. May had landed.

But first came Helen, five years and two months earlier.

Somewhere, somehow, in my 18-month recovery from a breakup with a good woman and after a brief encounter with a Swiss beauty, I realised what I was missing. My aloneness, which I liked, had all of a sudden turned to loneliness.

In a departure from my working-with-hands, face-to-face personality, I decided to try online dating. A perfect evening of mediocrity in the company of sensible drinking proved my tipping point. I signed up to the most expensive eHarmony package, then went about presenting myself to the world of women via photos and stories. Having no real selfies of myself, I stole photos from middle sister Alice's Facebook page, told fables about travel, tried to be real (which is a sham when you try so hard), and went live just before dawn. My online adventure started.

I had an inkling that this uncharacteristic adventure was a big deal. With my finger poised above the laptop ready to 'publish' my profile, I suspected that the return button was a portal to a changed life. It was, and here I am, married, different, renewed and completely sold on the idea of online dating. Although that's the hindsight view of things, because it was an awkward and fumbling experience for the first few weeks, as if I was a virgin all over again. I called the helpline, twice, about what I thought were nonsensical webpage issues and once about the various levels of service the platform provides. I talked to the same

person, bonding in a pseudo way with a case worker who seemed genuinely interested in the gig. I liked the experience. At least, I liked it in the way that I like to know which ailment I have when I'm sick. Much like Walter Mitty, I was never confident with the proceedings but happy to proceed based on not trusting my instinct. This turned out to be the right decision.

My one oversight was that I hated dating: all the overcommunication before meeting, the vagaries of subtext between un-met parties, and all the personal hygiene required if you finally arrange to meet. I don't like showers at the best of times, let alone when the reason for showering is to meet a person I might never see again. As a water/energy/time equation, dating seemed environmentally poor and a pain in the arse.

After a flood of emails from a wide variety of great women swirled around for weeks, I sensed I'd lose my job due to a drastic downturn in productivity. I promised myself one more week before I'd throw in the dating towel and turn to God. Compounding the scheduling and small-talk issues was the fact that I was geographically challenged, living in a backwater an hour and a half away from the big-city pond. It was also fieldwork season, which is a horrible time of year to have any kind of ongoing connection with a living entity, be it woman or goldfish. Large chunks of my calendar were blocked out with expeditions, so my dating schedule would need to mirror that of an overpaid sports star, fitting things in between pumping iron, running, dodging and physio. For me this meant meeting girls at whatever venue, at whatever time of the day, doing whatever they fancied doing (I listed options like kayaking and running), as long as I wasn't off running or kayaking for work. Drinking coffee five times a day with different women in an industrial estate where beards and frocks have replaced imports and exports sounded like the best way to snag myself a wife.

With great jostling I arranged ten dates in four days, based on two two-day blocks, two weeks apart. Each block contained five dates, spread between breakfast and after-work drinks. I purposefully didn't schedule dinner dates given I like going to bed early, and dinner dates were loaded with potential – I had no time for that. This meant I'd only be in Melbourne for one night for each block, saving on travel time and showers.

Helen slotted in at number four based on that wonderful array of non-selfie pics I've told you about, and quirky profile writing. She was a front runner by a country mile – which is not just hindsight speaking, my stepfather Warren and I heavily vetted all profiles and he can attest that Helen the favourite filly going into the experiment. If my impression of Helen turned out to be right, and I held up to her expectations, we'd date for two years before one of us would pop the question, get married a year later during autumn and have a child the following

year in spring. But first, we had to meet. After telling me about her busy netball schedule and new job, which had left her with only about eight minutes a week to do anything other than play sport, sleep, commute or work, I felt chuffed that our schedules aligned.

The great block of dates

Fresh off the back of an eight-day hike, showering between hiking and dating seemed an appropriate and timely use of water. First, I had a breakfast date with number one, then brunch with two – which was a little too close together I'll admit, allowing no time to lengthen breakfast into a brunch with number one if things went well, which they did. Brunch was perfectly fine; then there was a late lunch with number three, who was nuts, and the date was super fun. After three dates in quick succession I spent a few hours in a Melbourne park sipping electrolytes and eating organic liquorice to regain my strength.

Number four, Helen, was an after-work drink, a date that would continue into dinner if we liked each other, or fizzle out after quickly finishing whatever beverage we'd ordered. Helen had laid down this idea very clearly, something along the lines of, 'If we like each other enough after a drink, then we'll order dinner, and we'll decide together after the drink.' Holy hell, I'd thought, who is this person?! I'd never communicated with myself, a dog or another human with such simple language.

I suggested that we have dinner about a minute after Helen walked through the door. She had cycled to the destination, and was late, which I soon came to recognise was part of her DNA – although in her lightly sweaty state, with her sparkly eyes and world-class legs, I would have been happy just to glance at her from across the street. The date went well, eight out of ten, until I got to drive Helen to the train station, which made it a nine. I suppose the date was a ten in reality, as I drove away from the train station and decided to finish my barn in the coming months in order to marry her in it the following year. But, I reminded myself, I still had six dates to come, so I cooled my jets and went back to my parents' house to rest. At 6 am the next day I was going running with number five, which was nice. Six was similar, without the running. I ordered soup.

Seven was my undoing. Try as I did to remember her name, I got halfway through the date and forgot if I was talking to Kate (or was it Katey, who was actually date number two), Maya (my yet-to-meet number eight but with whom I'd exchanged soooo many emails, thus she was front of mind), Vanessa (date number three; bonkers, hard to forget, thus easy to remember her name), or none of the above. I also couldn't remember if we'd talked about the tram saga, or if that was earlier in the day with Steph (date number five), or Crystal (date number six). In short, I called number seven Helen, which ended my great date experiment.

Helen gave me flowers (natives, beautiful, with a small handmade card) on

date number three, when she came out to the farm via train for a skillet-cooked lunch from a fire in the paddock. Just as notable from the same date was a text she had sent her best mates with the location (my farm), listing the times and intentions of the date, based on the slim chance I'd kill her around dusk when the date was due to finish. I know about the text because she told me about it moments after handing me the flowers.

Things went from very good to very great over the next two and a half years. We bought a yellow-bricked apartment together in Melbourne's south-east, equidistant to our respective workplaces (me on train, Helen on bike). Next there was a proposal on Boxing Day in front of our respective families, then we were married in the barn and had our reception at Dad and Maggie's (my stepmum's) old hall, where we ate and drank until we passed out in the loft of their barn. Our honeymoon was in a neat little shack by the side of a lake a few hours from home, where I fished all day and Helen read books, and after a few months of wondering how the hell to get pregnant, Helen handed me the small plastic thing that told us the good news.

Dadhood

The first run I took as a new dad, two days after May's birthday, strung out on coffee and hungover to high hell, presented an unexpected bonanza of newness. The monkey in my frontal cortex beating its fists softly and repeatedly on the bouncy section of my brain was an old feeling, but the bush and the sounds of my feet on early summer trail and trees rubbing against each other in the breeze seemed new, as if I'd never heard the sounds of a human moving across the surface of Australia before.

Some kind of mammalian awakening of the senses was taking place, whereby my registry of the world around me was reset to the level of dog, or owl. New sounds and new feelings from the second floor of Warragul Hospital, room 205, were sprouting out of me as if my favourite shovel had unearthed a geyser. Fine clay from that particular running loop was covering my sweaty legs and chest, which was itself a balmy kind of coating that made me feel a little more aware of my humanness because I crackled as I went, drying on descents and wetting on the hills. But really, everything about my current embodiment conspired to generate a profound sense of awareness because my world's mass had shifted.

A fallen tree branch had me momentarily back on the trail, thinking about my feet. Underfoot sounds are louder than the forest when you listen to them, a roughage-like mixture of landings and take-offs that plant and push over a granola belt of leaves, tree roots, puddles, snake-sticks and wombat shit. Thin-edged sword grass and bracken whip at your shins as your arms push through saggy branches of tea tree and wattle. The soundscape makes you think (only if you don't think about the sounds) that life is the same old groove you've worn out over 39 years.

Of course, things weren't the same as always on this day, which I reminded myself when I hit a straight section of track needing almost no foot-to-brain power to coordinate things, thus allowing space to think about the gravity of new life. May, by heck, was here, meaning that my actions once I returned to the car would no longer be what they had been for as long as I remember: Beau the outdoor educator, or Beau the builder, filmmaker, writer or husband. I had never emerged from the bush as Beau the father. The way I use time, and the way I explore, challenge and venture into the world shifted as soon as I left the canopy of trees. My ute would take me directly to the bedside of a new human and the newest adventure of all.

Mayhood

I’m fully aware that my ego expanded as a new parent, taking on the kicking legs and fat hands of my newborn as if they were my own. Off I would trot, banging on about the wonders of May’s first sneeze; the first time she grabs at something; her fine hair that grows then completely falls out again and the time an ‘ick’ sounding gargle sounded like she cleanly and neatly told me I was a dick. I am new again through the newness of May, talking to others as if such things are happening to me. Parental gushing is mathematical; a single 1.0 human becomes a 1.5 human after the birth of their new child, with the other parent owning the other half of the new human, adding to their 1.0 self. We then go about telling the story of our overinflated 1.5s, having increased our sense of self by 50 per cent overnight. I’m not sure when May takes ownership of her full self, and we go back to a single figure, but for the sake of argument let’s say she can take the reins on her tenth birthday.

But the equation of adding another human to a functioning duo becomes even more slippery when May simultaneously adds to and subtracts from Mum and Dad. The newborn also waters down our singular identities as there is only so much time in the day to operate as one. By taking on another half-human you have to do more with your 120 awake hours a week, which often means doing less, perhaps poorly or not at all. Such an equation requires you to reinvent your use of time and what it is you think you are.

Man-o-man

I'm very male, and it's taken my whole life to figure this out. From the way I interact with a train timetable to loading timber on my ute, it's all skewed towards a particular type of thinking and acting. Up until now, for example, I've never felt unsafe at any time of the day, anywhere. City, town or wilderness were simply places to go, not locations to be guarded or tactful. Caution at times was geared around my practical capacities, not at fending off another human by, for example, walking on one side of the street compared to the other. Growing up, I had never thought about being in the world as anything other than a boy who, after a few years on the road under my own devices, would become a man.

I was starting to understand that the world of so-called adventure, which was often enough part of my job title, was riddled with many manly problems. Take for example the exemplary works of Phillip Noyce, Paul Zweig and Michael Nerlich, people I've never met, but whose voices I paid attention to while I was shaping my doctorate. Their ideas come from a time where white, wise, penis-wielding humans told us about 'The Adventurer' with little to no thought for women or indigenous cultures, at least not as forces in their own right. Women, according to many mid- to late 20th-century scholars, are always subordinate to the adventurous male, mostly because many men can carry more stuff on their backs. This had become my unthinking belief to some degree, as I charged off to exotic places to have pissing contests with other dudes, landscapes and seascapes.

Newer, truer, better ways of thinking about adventure are out there. In truth they've always existed but have forever lacked the same quantities of ink and airtime. 'The Flight from Women', chapter five of Zweig's book *The Adventurer*, has potential, noting the 'unrelenting masculinity of adventure literature, from the *Iliad* to *James Bond*', only to dash our hopes in returning to the narrative of the all-conquering male, as if tickling the tail features of the female adventurer as a rare bird. Zweig writes, 'The adventurer cannot be contained by situations. His life is a flight into danger, as if he were pursued by an enemy which he fears more than danger itself. And this appearance of flight is altogether apt, for the adventurer does have such an enemy. The adventurer is in flight from women.' I wonder if the sentence could be flipped: 'The adventurer is in flight from man.' Saying this aloud makes a lot more sense: women fleeing from the brutish male, and in doing so embodying acts of bravery, strength and stamina, sounds pretty adventurous.

Fittingly, back at the kitchen table, my wife enters the house at the same time

I'm thinking about another Helen, the beauty of the *Iliad*: '. . . governed by the power of women, it is Helen who creates the epic occasion, by running off with Paris'. As we talk about something ordinary and pleasantly everyday, I look back at the computer screen and smile at the juncture of the *Iliad*'s Helen and the one digging into a muffin at the kitchen bench.

It's important to know that the most proficient and staggeringly brave sea kayaker in the world today is Freya Hoffmeister, a German paddler who has recently circumnavigated South America. Yet for the roughly 450 paddlers who have crossed Bass Strait in the modern era of sea kayaking, only a handful are women. It was not for a lack of trying that I failed to get a mixed male–female cohort on a film I made, *Bass by Kayak*, asking far and wide for female co-expedition members to sign up. Male members were also hard to come by, but ultimately available, and this may be telling of the gender imbalance in the so-called adventure stakes. This contrasts with the university where I work, where more than half the outdoor education students are female, as has been the case for over ten years. Many of these women go on to become proficient paddlers, climbers, hikers, and doers, and I was heartened to see an evenly mixed showing of faces at a recent presentation of *Bass by Kayak* to one of Australia's largest sea-kayaking clubs. Why there are so few female crossers of Bass Strait, therefore, is a little baffling. It is likely that Bass Strait, as with many of the famous mountaineering routes, is on the bucket list of an overwhelming number of male paddlers, perhaps thanks to the dominant masculine bias in the culture associated with risky adventure travel.

The order, size and weight of ingredients

Like my recent awakening to being a man, in full knowledge that I blundered my way here, I'm questioning the hierarchy of other worldly matters, trying to see the invisible strings of history that move my arms and legs. There was even internal debate about the structure of this book, about how and in what order I tell stories, which leads to questioning how, why and in what order I preference the moving parts within the stories themselves. Over time this has led me to think of the stories themselves as the afterthought of reality flourished with all the best bits. Put another way, a little less philosophically, I've come to realise that everything is a waste of time unless you think of it otherwise. That's an impossible situation to be in if you think about it because you still have to choose between saying one thing or another, doing one thing or another, thinking one thing is beautiful or horrible – based on a hugely complex system of good and bad, tens and ones. The point I'm making is that our lives, including our adventures, and our eventual stories, are all based on umpteen hierarchies steering us. I'm far from understanding these hierarchies, but I try, which every so often keeps me up at night.

At seven months old, May was going through a heavy drinking phase. I was trying to do the opposite, limiting myself to half a bottle of wine on weekends in order to finish this book. I don't have a drinking problem normally, but on-off drinking throughout the week means I'm dusty the next morning, making me a crap writer, and the mornings are when I write best. Birdsong and new light breed words for me and I have no desire to check in with the rest of the world via socials or email.

I'm changing my milkaholic daughter at 3 am. In between taking off and putting on the new nappy, May wees. Of course she does. Same as yesterday, and twice last week, I'm caught out like an idiot who thinks a few seconds of freewheeling won't produce the same result. I hear the gush then splash as her small fat feet come down on the pool in excited kicks, soaking three layers of clothing and her sleeping bag. With all the undoing and re-dressing, I do my best toned-down versions of amusements to the sleep-needing, very awake little human.

Back in bed I put my head on the pillow and, without wanting to, start thinking philosophically, annoyingly, about the stories of this book, loosely told around the key themes of moving, making, and eating. My problem, or lack of one, which is hard to figure at such an hour, is deciphering a hierarchy of needs based on someone who moves, makes, and eats. All of us in some way enact all

three life forces, but to varying degrees, in differing order. Troubling me is the opportunity cost of such forces. How much of each do I do in order to feel fulfilled, worthy of all the food and energy I consume, useful to other living things, and how much do I merit being able to talk and film about this for others? Such thinking is the antichrist to sleep.

Removing myself from the warmth of a bed next to a great woman, in a wonderful little home on a magic little property, with a new person growing in the other end of the house, I head to the warm embrace of a computer screen to ponder the formula. I picture a lean ancient Greek runner, moving from one town to the next to deliver a message. On the runner's feet are beautifully made sandals, fashioned from the thickest leather from the best part of the hide. The sandals were not made by the runner but an expert craftsperson, and in some way have enabled the runner to complete his task. The Mediterranean scene is dusty and hot and the ground is comprised of sharp bone-like shards of rock that are bleached white. Olive trees and goats are about, giving blobs of shade against the high sun, playing out to the sound of footfalls and bleating. It is an old scene, before reems of paper made millions of books, but it's not so long ago that you can't imagine it taking place.

I think of an older place by removing the sandals and replacing the shardy, bleached path of the runner with a red, fine-grained pad of dirt, hemmed with sturdy, tufty grass. The human has a long shadow, running at dawn or dusk when the temperature is cool. No sea breeze exists in such a place, but nights are cool, giving reprieve to the rapidly increasing temperature during the day. It is bare feet that run, and the person runs easily, as if they're built for it.

Both runners get to where they are going and they eat, as they did the day before, and the day before that. They take in calories and minerals and complex algorithms of one thing promoting or stifling another thing, and all those things give them the energy to run. The beauty of the scene is not necessarily where

their run took them, and what purpose it served, nor when it happened, because I imagine each had an important role to their life and the life of others, which made the runs more than just a way to complete errands. The runs represent the beautiful, simple potential of the human, a moving body enabled by non-human items such as sandals and food. Beautiful to see and beautiful to be, the runner is a runner first, user of things second, and an eater third. But of course, the runner needs a place to rest, a home of some kind that has water and warmth and social connections, and food to make all of this into being before any kind of run can take place.

We know this, it's simple. But saying it aloud, laying out the ideas that make a simple run a reality, gives great insight into one thing existing as a combination of many. Adventure, like running, is full of ingredients. If I am to acknowledge the ingredients of adventure, and play with them like a child plays with the cardboard box of their Christmas present, I can redefine the hierarchy of things. Getting to a destination like the South Pole, for example, can become an obsessive focal point of planning, thinking, and acting for the adventurer. They count calories of goo that no longer looks like food and scrutinise the loft of down suits, all of these ingredients geared towards the heady idea of spending an hour of bliss in one geographical spot. I get it, and much of me likes such narrow focus, and working towards one thing, but I've also downshifted to put more emphasis on the adventure of ingredients, rather than that of well-cooked, chewed-over, hard-baked results.

I'm not necessarily referring to the overused idea of the journey being more important than the destination, because I don't believe this to be true. Parts of the journey are destinations in and of themselves, giving us multiple and in fact endless destinations between A and B. B, by the way, might be a particular time, place, recognition of a moment being eight out of ten, or trusting yourself to make anywhere, at any time, an end point, much like Forrest Gump ending his cross-country run unceremoniously in the middle of the road. It might be that I'm honing a sense of sustainability, a wonderful word suffering from overuse and lack of understanding.

Gary Robbins, a bearded chap I admire for the dimple-cheeked way he goes about running frenetically for days at a time, might be a perfect example of burning the candle a little too hot, obsessively, on one thing. After coming close to finishing the fabled 100+-mile Barkley Marathons, Gary slumped back to regular life a lesser version of himself, burned to a crisp. I was much the same after months of paddling around the bottom of Africa, wondering what the point of adventure is when I fell short of the intended destination, wallowing about for a big chunk of time getting over the fact that I didn't finish the task I'd cooked

up. Being comfortable with personalised forms of sustainability is a start. My version of things nowadays is that I'll throw myself at projects through simplified objectives and simplistic planning, but I won't be a slave to high points and furthest shores if it means flogging myself half to death, which teeters on failing to get the job done while losing my sense of humour.

What seems to be the problem then is not the ingredients, which will forever be part of any journey, but the objective – the end point. As far as I can gather, pointy-ended adventures in which you go long, hard, fast, high and wide are one part fun, if you're lucky, to nine parts hard work. The alternative is finding yourself in an obtainable place layered up with healthy aspects of challenge, curiosity, and creativity while adventuring in backwaters and alleyways under your nose. Lo and behold, these stunts turn out to be the most fun you've had in far too long.

Big gums

I decided to spend a night in a gum tree. Helen didn't think the idea was all that odd, issuing a hall pass without any reluctance, shooing me off to the barn to gather my thoughts. Eleven gumtrees shade the barn and yard. At least, eleven that you can eyeball from the barn or front door. Half a dozen giant stumps still protrude from the lawn like headstones and tell of a past mega-forest, so those that remain seem both ordinary in their Australian gum-tree way, and extraordinary in that they're still here after a century and a half of land clearing.

While a handful of gum varieties grow on the farm, it's lorded over by the impressive *Eucalyptus strzelecki*, named after Polish explorer Paweł Strzelecki, who passed through the district in 1840, although the gums themselves were not known to be distinct from the swamp gum, *Eucalyptus ovata*, until 1990. In their later years, being likely around 150 years old, they rim the house, shading us during the summer, and dropping limbs throughout the year to provide firewood.

A gum tree is unremarkable in Australia in that it's one tree in a landscape of billions, in what really is a giant pad of old dirt held together by gum roots. A country that's also a continent, 7.741 million square kilometres dominated by the limby tops and cockeyed trunks of a genus with over 800 varieties, making gums, as a super-collective, one of the most resilient and dominant forms of life on the planet.

A year or so out from the obsessive final throes of my thesis, when I still functioned as a relatively inside-outside human, I looked up into the canopy of the gums during a particularly hot, windy afternoon. Forty stale knots of interior wind, direct from the baked centre of the continent, blew in from the north-west. As Helen and I live in foothills that run into the coast, we get the throaty last gasp before it dilutes into sea breeze. I met the wind on the deck, which is the only spot to sit on such a day because it's front row, as the gusts hit the house broadside, smacking into the front door. I watched in awe as the surface of the world became hairbrained with air that's in a hurry.

Facing wind, especially hard wind, is impressive because its rushing presence is the only thing you can think about, breeding narrow-mindedness and unease. Like torrential rain, periods of high wind tend to contain thresholds, a tension built upon the breaking points of power poles and roofing screws, hanging over us the longer it goes on, anticipating something bad. Soaked in sweat from half a day's work, I took a few minutes to do nothing but look into the canopy of the gums. They epitomised summer, having lessened their leaf load to cope with the reduced ground water. I'd noticed cracks for the first time a few weeks ago, inch

wide, lightning bolt incisions opening up the subterranean world.

I watched as the four giant gum trees on the northern border of the property roared into action, capturing the full force of turbulence as gusts swept into their canopy from the long fetch of bare paddocks. Trees in our area tend to suffer from a lack of support from smaller trees, bushes or ecological diversity, left alone to fend for themselves, defenceless from all quarters. Ten lanes of high-speed traffic have nothing on the rush of air ripped hard through thousands of long, fibrous leaves.

I've been inspired by the sound of wind before, scared stiff at times, as it crosses paths with elements of the world. That's the thing about wind: for all of its power, you can't actually see it unless you see what it encounters. For humans to get a sense of scale, wind needs something to push around, like bedsheets on a single string of line tethered to a weathered Nebraskan homestead. The world moves because one thing in the landscape tells you about it. Beaufort's wind scale, a famous system of visualising how wind pushes us around at ground level and putting a speed to it, be it the land or sea versions, uses trees bending a particular way and smoke from a chimney to tell us how hard things are blowing. In the bake of summer, when things are crisping off and are becoming less flexible versions of their subtle and moist wintery selves, the top half of the trees whip and scratch at their lower halves like fingers and arms of a hyperextending gymnast.

Hairs raise on my arms as I estimate, not for the first time, if the largest gum would hit me if it were to fall. I like the drama of such a scene. When the house moves in the height of the gusts, the deck does too, which gives the feeling of the earth moving beneath me.

My gaze shifts from one violent branch movement to another before I strategise a little more by trying to identify the largest section of tree taking on the greatest movement. I do this by sitting still and closing one eye, lining up the section of gum with distant hills to set my point of reference. I spend a winky minute or two trying to figure out size of branch vs size of movement, at the same time trying to decipher the strengths of the gusts. As I sip water, I think, 'Gee, that'd be a helluvanadventure, spending time in the canopy of those trees, strapped to a branch like a bucking bronco.'

Four years later, when a virus started to spread around the world with alarming pace, my backyard, and being home, took on a profound sense of potential. Green grass and the deep shade of the barn started to sparkle at me like icy mountain summits and wide horizons of sea. Of course, I'm romanticising a moment as if it was a moment, and it wasn't, but it was a time when I wanted to be nowhere else because what I saw offered so much. No doubt a small baby

lording over the house had a lot to do with my willingness to nest, and so *Big Gums*, the film, based on a few notes written down years earlier, kicked off. Having walked and paddled to work, made a barn and paddle, eaten my weight in beans and then run around the block while fixing things, it sounded about right that I would be spending the night strapped to the limb of a tree as a new dad, within view of the front door, in the name of backyard adventuring.

Ladders, rope, tackle

It turns out I collect ladders. Half a dozen timber varieties of various size, colour and sketchiness and a few aluminium versions that are equally not quite right, having bounced from someone's ute and been wounded by the road. I take a few from the barn and lay them out on the lawn. I've never actually paid money for a ladder, or a shovel, but have both in abundance. I take a shovel too in case I need to even out the footing of a ladder. A suspicious box of ropes, cables and pulleys comes next, taking up the entire top of my outdoor table. A large duffel bag of climbing kit is kept under the TV we no longer use, revealing equipment I've barely touched in 15 years. I unzip the bag, revealing a ropey, chalky, sweaty-synthetic smell, which takes me back to a rocky crag somewhere in the state where my sister's boyfriend Brad taught me how to climb, fall, work and drink. When I suck back the aroma, which could be bottled and sold to outdoor types, my mind's eye kicks off with a slide-show of dirtbag living in magnificent landscapes, never, ever, thinking about the consequences of age or time. I fish out my woodchopping shoes – code for cheap; white, once-trendy, from the Salvos – which had somehow made their way into the climbing kit. On they go.

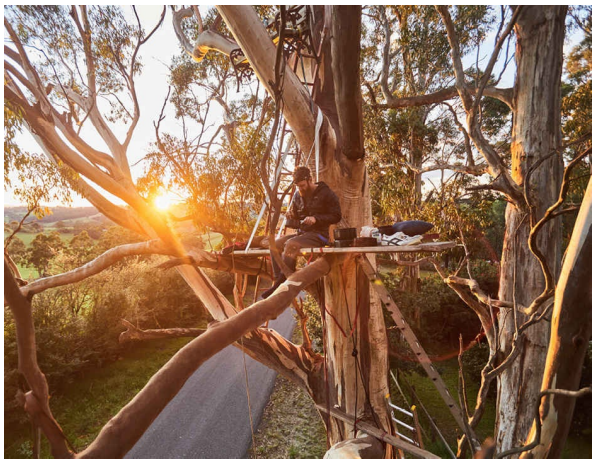
I set aside a bit of overnight kit such as sleeping bag, bedroll, book, headtorch, stove and the mystery tuckerbag of dinner and breakfast goodies thrown together by Helen. I get on with the job of making a place to sleep and eat within the tree, angling ladders between branches and lashing concreters' planks between limbs of a similar height. Somewhere to sleep needs to be flat enough and high enough to see above the row of Hawthorn trees alongside the road – which is at least 8 metres up. My thinking, and preference, regardless of if I'm in a tree or not, is to be asleep by 8 pm, knackered, so I can lapse into a coma and wake with the birds before dawn. Coffee and food will kick me into the new day before I convert my sleeping platform into a place to sit and chat for a podcast with a nice young chap named Pat from *We Are Explorers* – a well-known website for stories, podcasts and films about all things adventure travel. In all, I'll spend about 14 hours in the tree before coming down.

My two great themes are backyard adventuring and the appreciation of seeing life from the limbs of an endangered yet everyday gumtree. Spending a night in a tree is not unique or difficult, but it's easy not to do, and I'd be silly not to go through the mediocre idea given it's possible, fun, and Helen okayed it. Or, put another way, I'm spending the night in a tree to find out how familiar places look different from another angle, and to see why this matters.

Making, festering, sleeping

Lofty ideas get slimmed down the further into the project I get. Height, sleeping set-up and the expanse of my view all come in as less spectacular than my original concept had cooked up. I gradually talk myself into liking the fact that things become more mediocre as the day rolls out. Manufacturing a place for sleeping, eating, hosting a podcast and promoting an identifiable sense of human gratification at being up rather than down takes more time that I imagined. In other words, I run out of daylight, so I have to make do.

Instead of being in the top third of the tree where the real action takes place, I'm about a third of the way up, nested within the largest branches, on planks and not on a hammock, stretcher or homemade porta-ledge. Everything is less spectacular, making me an everyday Joe eating humble pie, which feels okay by dusk, when I've made enough of a nest to call it done, and when I can eat, wax lyrical to the camera and sleep. The view is still a new and different outlook over lands and things I've long looked at. I can see perfectly into the neighbour's paddocks to check if they grow dope, tapping into my fantasy. Of course, they don't. They grow horses instead, which is the opposite to growing dope, burning great wads of money each day on feeding, shoeing, housing, riding, clothing and generally bending over backwards for an animal that runs on its fingernails. I finally see the horses that provide our garden with horse shit, dumped into our compost bin by Jeff. What I was looking at was the fertile grounds of our tomato patch.



To the north-east is my boyhood town, a ridge town that's growing arms and legs down its east–west spurs. I don't like this version of progress, knowing that some of the development is responsible for the dismantling of the very thing that allows me to see the spread. If the council, hungry for rates, has its way over

time, it is the environment, always the environment, that will suffer. Try as they might to argue that five new trees get planted for every old one that gets the chop, which might be the case, they are failing to see the significance of important cross-generational specimens. Tree ecology seems to have been left out of their bulging, concrete-wielding development manuals. Big and old trees are holey (ugly), full of dead branches (unsafe), bulk carriers of carbon, shaders of land (which makes for bad lawns), and give trophic levels a spine, which means they provide smaller trees, bushes and ground plants with a nursery (which is seen as bushy, pain-in-the-arse twiggy crap). Old trees host thousands of different life forms, from birds and bees to lizards and bugs, mammals, fungus and snotty-nosed kids. Let alone the fact that big old trees have been here longer than our great-grandparents, trees that started growing here when our years started with 18. Replacing their wrinkled-up, huge, half-dead, often awkward and leaning hulks will take another century.

My blood boils when a mid-life developer finds themselves with an ounce of influence within local governance. All of a sudden one or two individuals, part of a community made up of tens of thousands, are able to kill off giant old trees like I kill mosquitos – which is a poor use of metaphor, because I know of the great pollinating work that mosquitoes do and it seems our decision-makers who cull trees don't help the environment at all. Delivering death blows to old trees on the community's behalf is an act that town planners rarely ever witness, let alone do themselves. Downing a tree that's hundreds of years old would shake their bones when the huge mass crashes to earth, and if it doesn't, then we know they're less human than the rest of us. Such a culling should invoke the Spanish Inquisition, whereby local elders, kids, loggers, greenies and anyone who has an opinion on the subject can beef it out in some kind of caucus. I detest the idea of an old tree being sacrificed for new trees to be planted among new estates, because it shows a lack of environmental awareness, creativity in designing human-nature habitation and empathy for non-human life.

I climb a tree to leave such acidic thoughts on the ground, passing myself over to another living thing in order to be bumped around by breeze. When I do come down from my perch, metaphorically and literally, I presume I won't be so angry about things, enjoying my trees because they're not really mine, very much alive and bloody magnificent. I'm lucky enough to be living with them on a property that, for now, has my name on the title. With a 4 x 4 towing strap around me, three planks and a meaty branch above, I lie down, thinking about sleep.

Dawn

Waking up in a gum tree is much like waking up in a bush 20 metres from your university dorm. The first few blinks are to get your bearings; as I come to life on my sloping bed I wonder how long I've slept, if at all, so I don't have to reach far back in my memory to reconstruct events. Tethered via slings and carabiners to my waist harness, never going to plummet to my death, I did rest, having a long dream that was mostly reality, which was pleasant, but there wasn't a lot of depth to it. Being comfortable and semi-lucid meant I stretched out the evening for what it was, and experienced a dripping version of something that usually happens in one big gush. Looking up at the remarkable canopy, or sideways at the sparkle of town and the far-off hills blinking summit lights, there was a pleasant view never far away from thinly veiled eyelids.

By the time I sit up in my sleeping bag, dangling my legs over the side, which will always feel good, my old mate fun arrives, which is just as well because day one was all about construction and busyness and my gripe with people who take down big trees to build crap houses. I have to remind myself, to remember why I'm doing this. In the face of so much doing it was nice, and necessary, even if prodded, to be washed over with a sense of satisfaction, to sit still for long enough to think about the afterglow while still in the venture itself. With the road beneath, hills at forehead level and washy gum leaves moving about around me, it is an excellent location to be alive.

Having hauled up the tuckerbag and stove, I put on the brew, which is a dirty version of coffee a few shades stronger than I'd make on firm ground. I've forgotten my cup, so I drink a large vat of grainy mud with oodles of sugar from the stove pot, blackening my hands. I feels like I'm adding to the general oddness of the 24-hour tattoo, which I like. I take my time, having forgotten to remind myself to slow down, meaning things are working. Ever so slightly I spoil the pleasant occasion by making a film about it, pushing record every other minute, or verbalising instead of internalising, making good use of the fuzzy mic that's clipped to my jacket. Mitch, flying drones, and Chris, from the bucket of a cherry-picker, train their cameras on the scene, and me, and the gums, and the morning gets recorded for the film.

I've become better at experiencing things genuinely in front of a camera, so the coffee is made to be drunk, and beans – which I'm far from sick of – are cooked then eaten from the grainy remains of the coffee pot. Things are real, because it's easier that way. By the time the sun comes up all the way, it's as if I've had a full head of sleep. Not an ounce of tiredness remains when daylight

arrives in earnest. Things are golden and glinting, and a breeze makes for the perfect companion to keep away mosquitoes.

Back to being task-orientated, having indulged long enough in thinking good and unusual thoughts, which itself is a good thing because the unexpected is what keeps humans going, I stuff gear back in canvas haul bags and start to reverse the process of making a home in a tree. Helen makes a fleeting appearance on the deck of the house in her blue dressing gown before remembering that a film crew is here spying on her husband, retreating to the company of a hair brush and May.

Having feared I've become one of those people who has park benches sitting on their lawns but only ever looks at them or moves them to mow the lawn instead of sitting on them, I haul the park bench to my sleeping platform to conduct the in-tree podcast with Pat, who is also taking photographs of the escapade. We talk about adventure, and travel, and life as a wealthy enough bloke who's jetted about the place to go find himself, and now finds himself back on home turf, musing. My ego gets worked over as I navigate between what I've been, what I currently am, and where I'd like to go.

After 50 minutes of chatting we call it a wrap, both film and podcast. I take a big breath, knowing that we've jammed an awful lot of living into the last day, and unhitch the park bench to lower it down to the lawn below. The lads pack their things. When the last car departs, including Helen taking May on a trip to town for groceries – and I regret not going with them, as I like buying vegetables – I sit on the park bench and do nothing, absolutely nothing for 20 minutes, which is the first time I've done such a thing from that bench, ever, even having remade the contraption years ago with new (old) wood, and new (actually new) bolts. Nothing is not always everything, but at that particularly time it was, and a perfect way to end the odd brilliance of a night in a tree.

PANDEMIC

Big Gums was shot a few days before Australia went into lockdown for the first wave of COVID-19. At first, the enforced measures of staying home, working from home and avoiding all non-vital human contact were no different from the first three months of the year. Having been made redundant at the university because outdoor education was cut, I'd been home since Christmas, writing, finishing things, consolidating. It was the first time I was unemployed since my first paper-round job at the age of 13, getting up when May said so instead of an alarm clock. Life was bliss, from everyday porridge mornings with the girls to slow laps of the block with the pram in the evening, watching grass grow then get eaten by cows. Much like a workday driven by tea and coffee, May days were pretty similar, based around milk and blowout nappies, naps and playtime. We'd be sure to visit the cows each day, often at the same time magpies were warbling and hunting. When May said 'moo' I said 'hell yeah', glad I hadn't missed it. Helen ordered veggie boxes from the local food hub, and my eldest sister Jade and brother-in-law Charlie with kids Berty, Harry and Clementine were up the road for a term with the local school, making lockdown, as far as I could gather, the kind of life I'd been meaning to have.

During a radio interview about *Big Gums*, which was released as COVID-19 was losing its grip on some countries and exploding in others, I found myself daydreaming, thinking how remarkable coconuts are to travel across oceans to colonise new shores, which, like any daydream, is awfully distracting on live radio. Saving myself I turn into a footballer who answers the next question with horrible predictability, boring myself, which I sense gives the interviewer a good segue into asking the perennial wrap up question: 'Beau, what's next?'

Having barely drawn breath from two decades of doing stuff, I always, without fail, get asked that one bloody question. It's brash of us really, not allowing all the happenings of our past to just sit for a while, settling. Even if only for the time it takes to peel an apple, or re-thread shoe laces, to celebrate what took place without being in the future. But I get it, and don't blame the radio host, as it's a perfectly understandable question to ask. I know too that my time-managed self, which is visible in block form via my Google calendar, suffers from the same line of future telling to keep me in a constant state of anticipation. Without fail, like you, as soon as something is done, something else

is there to take its place.

Regardless of how removed I am from the actual torment of coronavirus, living within a full-blown pandemic is an excellent, and in fact ideal place, to dwell on what we've done thus far. Everything all of a sudden seems a little more meaningful because death is a little closer to all of us, and we know it. Though we look ahead to continue the inevitability of doing things, we shave off the more frivolous items of our day to day because, lo and behold, they don't seem to matter as much. In truth, I've been doing this for years, but it seems there's nothing like a global health scare to make things sharper, and clearer.

I haven't started on the next adventure yet as I write this, but in a Covid world it will be somewhere close by, it will likely involve a shovel and will definitely involve a hat, out-of-date sunscreen and a half-arse map.

THANKS

I’m crumby at doing this because I rarely thank the people who deserve it the most. Perhaps thankable people are so much a part of my ecosystem that they’re obviousness eludes me. At my wedding, not yet drunk- which may have given me half an excuse, I forgot to mention my mum, best mate, and Helen. So, to make amends, here are the people that have been a great, often silent, tidal influence on me who are, in the book or not, exceptional people. In no order whatsoever:

To my Gran, the empress of our family, responsible for 48 lives and counting. Thanks to my sisters Azzadine for taking on the sick, Alice for sticking it to the boys and Jade for being my longest friend. Thanks to my best mates who I don’t see enough; Marco, Whitt, Robby, Jono, Al, Laura, Pete, Jodi, Benj, Cuth, Mitch, Chriso, Charlie, Ponch- bloody hell you’re good people. To Mike and Jed at Camp Sangamon, thank you for making me part of a brilliant family of misfits in a place that will forever be my second home. To my extended family who are spread far and wide, doing far and wide things, I’m proud to be associated with you. To my Dad for being the oddest bastard in the district, and the most inclusive human I’ve ever met. To step-mum Maggie for introducing me to the world; step dad Mos for being an unflinchingly good man to me and Helen’s parents for trusting me to shack up with their daughter. To Alice Grundy of Brio books for being an excellent person, editor, collaborator and dancer. And to Mum, my hero, for being a practical, make-it-work force of nature.

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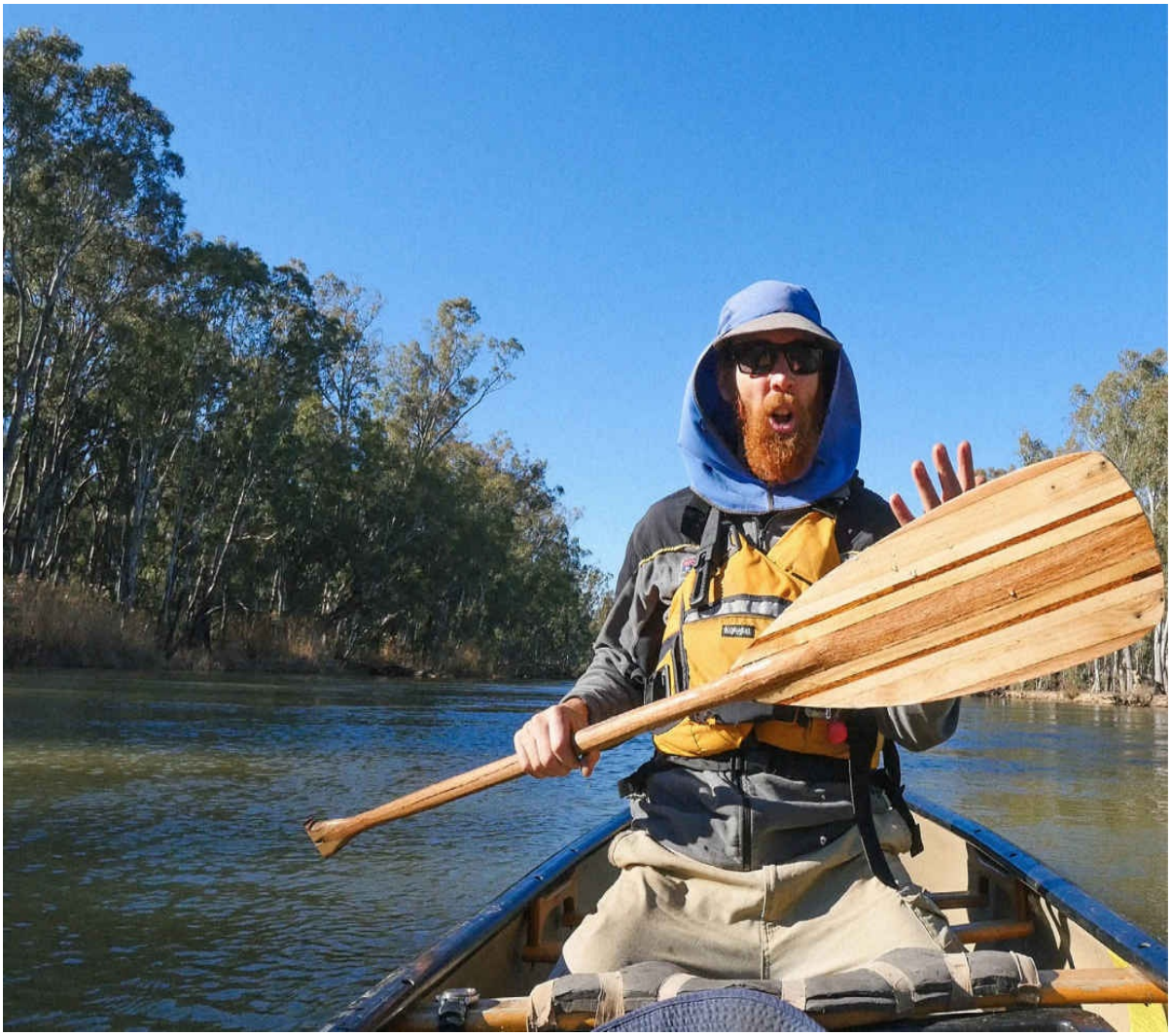
22. Beau Miles



BRIO
First published by Brio in 2021
Brio Books PO Box Q324, QVB Post Office,NSW 1230, Australia
www.briobooks.com.au

Cataloguing-in-publication data is available from the National Library of Australia
978-1-922267-30-6 Backyard Adventurer (print)
978-1-922267-31-3 Backyard Adventurer (digital)
Cover design by Brio Books, www.briobooks.com.au Cover photo credit: Bryan Hynes, hynessightproductions.com
Maps by Roy Chen, www.briobooks.com.au
Proudly Printed In Australia
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson’s Printing Group

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Pandemic
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