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# Chapter the First: What Does Your Daddy Do?

WHEN my youngest daughter, Elena, was small and at a new school of some kind (I didn't like any of them much), the teacher asked the circle of little children around her, 'What does your mummy or your daddy do for a job?'

The little hands went up in the air and the answers flew thick and fast. My mummy's a lawyer. My daddy's a countant. My mummy builds houses. And so on.

When it came to Elena, the answer about me was both perceptive and entirely accurate.

'My daddy sits in caravans.'

Yes, it's true. That's what I've done much of my life: sit in caravans, or trailers as they say in the USA. Sitting, waiting for someone to tell me what to do, somewhere near a film set. I used to sit and read the paper, or sometimes even the script. Nowadays I stare at my iPhone looking for enlightenment—it's never there. Once in a while, there's a knock on the door and the assistant to someone's assistant who is an assistant to someone else might kindly ask you if you'd like a cup of tea. Of course I would. If you're really lucky they might even bring you lunch, but that would be the assistant to the first assistant who brought you tea. When Elena would visit me at work, that is what I would be doing. Sitting in a trailer, in a car park somewhere, having a cuppa, waiting: her daddy at work.

It doesn't sound like a life well lived, does it? At least it's quiet.

But, once in a while, someone does say, 'We need you on set, Mr Neill.' And that's when you emerge, blinking, into the daylight. You walk a few metres and spend a few minutes doing what it is you do. Act. Once in a while, with luck, you might even act well.

And, just possibly, you might even go further, walk a few more metres, and actually live some life. That life, as well as that acting, is what this book is about. There's nothing terribly exceptional about it, but it is mine. I did a *little* more than sit in trailers. Much of it I found amusing and rewarding. It was all a surprise, this I know. I'm far luckier, in hindsight, than I deserved.

But just now I paused for a minute to ponder who exactly I'm writing this for. Is this for my children, or their children? Is it for you, perhaps, this reader who might have a passing interest in a common-or-garden screen actor? As a performer, it's best if you know your audience. What do they want? What should I give them?

But I don't know who you are. It's hard to get the tone right. How intimate should this be? How jolly, how entertaining, am I required to be? It's a bit baffling.

Then the answer came to me, and it was obvious. I am writing for myself. This may be yet another selfish impulse, and I've had, I'm told, many of those over the years.

The thing is, I'm crook. Possibly dying. I may have to speed this up. Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I have time to burn, and time to think. And writing, jotting thoughts and memories down, is a salve. It gets my mind off things.

This book is therefore somewhat flung together. I write in haste. You can drop it any time you like if you're bored, but you are welcome to dip in again whenever you want.

In the meantime, I'm enjoying it, and I hope you might too. Whoever you are...**Copyrighted Material**

# Ireland

PERHAPS I should start at the beginning. Let's take a stroll down this windy path and I will point things out as we drift past.

I was born in Omagh, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, in 1947. My parents named me Nigel. We were renting a modest Georgian house, Mullaghmore House, just out of Omagh, surrounded by fields, trees, stone walls and donkeys. My father, Dermot, a New Zealander, was in the British Army, and was stationed at the army depot there after the war, and after his time with the occupying forces in Trieste.

Mum and my brother, Michael, had joined Dad in Italy, and they had a very happy year out there. Dad had word from a brother officer that an Austrian cavalry regiment was being disbanded



My mother said that as a baby I developed a fear of strange women, who would coo and pinch my cheeks.

in Vienna. He confiscated an enormous old ambulance, drove over a couple of mountain passes and nicked two outstanding horses, which he ferried back over the alps. Dad's job in Trieste was to keep apart the remnants of fascist and communist forces in a region of Italy that has always been in dispute. But mostly he and Mum charged around on horseback, having a great time and conceiving me. Dad claimed the deed was done at the Hotel Danieli, 'one wet afternoon in Venice'. The Danieli was the best hotel in the city, but my parents had no money to speak of, and so I can only imagine that they had some special rate reserved for the occupying forces. Obviously, I was destined for a lifetime of upgrades in five-star hotels.

I'm not entirely sure Dad was home in Omagh when I was born, because it was about this time that he went to Greece for a year. The Greek Civil War was at its height, and Dad served as adviser to a Greek general in the struggle against the communist insurgents there. Like all of Dad's active service, it was never mentioned, though he did tell the story about being stuck up in the mountains surrounded by hostile forces. He and his men were dug in, waiting for reinforcements. To their astonishment they spotted a courier of some kind, hightailing it up the mountain and dodging sniper fire. The messenger arrived safely, and put an important-looking document directly into Dad's hands. He opened it and found it was from Lloyds Bank, informing him that he was overdrawn to the tune of two shillings and sixpence, and if the situation was not immediately rectified they would have no choice but to close his account. For the rest of his life Dad would invariably curse whenever passing a branch of said bank.

And then there was the heartbreak he endured on return. He'd commissioned a rug from these women in a mountain village where the fighting was most intense. It took the best part

of a year. He brought it back with him on the ship, and in fact he saw it swing down by crane to the dock at Southampton. It was never seen again; the wharfies pinched it.

But I was born in the kitchen at Mullaghmore. On the kitchen table. Poor Mum; I never did find out why on a table.



'Your father,' my aunt once said in pointed reference to me. 'Now *he* was a handsome man.'

Proceedings were apparently briefly interrupted when the midwife had to shoo out a couple of pigs that managed to break in somehow. This may explain my affection for pigs. One of my best friends is an ageing Kunekune boar, inappropriately named Angelica, whom I rescued some fifteen years ago. He and I are becoming, as pets and owners often do, more and more alike. We are both grumpy, ugly, white-whiskered, and enjoy a good back scratch.

Nineteen forty-seven was also the Chinese Year of the Pig. We were meant for each other.

My mother, Priscilla, was very English, very pretty and very brisk. No nonsense, and I imagine my birth on the kitchen table was little fuss either. She had a new and very fast Connemara pony, and wrote in her memoir, ‘Almost as soon as Nigel had been born, I took off hunting on Danny. He was marvellous.’ She makes no mention of my being born bright yellow with jaundice.



The kitchen table at Mullaghmore, the scene of my birth.



She was a calm presence who took life with equanimity, and was sociable, funny and generous. Her life was other people, dogs and horses. She was much loved, and she loved us. I will explain Nigel to you in a little while.

I'm afraid I remember nothing clearly of Omagh. But I have



My mother, uncharacteristically wearing lipstick.



gone back a couple of times, and visited Mullaghmore House. It's a small hotel now, and the owner is a charming man, Louis Kelly, who is always wonderfully welcoming when I turn up. We stand around and stare at the kitchen table, the scene of the crime.

He tells great stories. I loved the one about his grandfather, who fell in love with a girl from the other side, whether Catholic or Protestant I can't remember. There was no way that was going to be allowed back then. The young couple went out in a field and lay down on top of a haystack, announcing they were going to stay the night there; both families turned out en masse in a state of outrage. His future grandfather stood up, waved a pistol and said, 'This is a gun. And in the gun are six rounds of ammunition. We will stay the night here. And any man who says otherwise, I will shoot him.' The families backed wisely away, had a talk and returned the next morning. Saying, 'All right, you can come down now, and sure you can get married if you must.'

So romantic and so bloody Irish. I hope I've told it right.

That last time I was leaving Omagh, I walked around and made my peace with the place, pleased to see the rebuild after the hideous bombing in 1998. It's a pretty town that gently slopes towards a lazy river, with splendid views over the soft green hills of County Tyrone. I thought, It's time to go, there is no real connection for me here, even though it's the place of my birth. No one knows me, and that's fine. But I needed to pee, and I needed a cup of tea. I stopped at a roadhouse just out of town, and ordered. And then something happened that floored me. The woman who brought me my tea leant over and said, so quietly, 'We're very proud of you here.' I could have cried.

My earliest memory is being very ill with whooping cough and feeling terribly alone in an enormous white room and it was very cold and scary dark outside.

And, yes, it's true, I was critically ill. Whooping cough could

kill you, and Mum said I almost died. I think I must have been perhaps three. I stuttered very badly as a child, and Mum always blamed the whoop for this. I've been back to that very room and it is in fact tiny. I was just small by comparison. And of course I wasn't alone. I had the best mother a little boy could ask for.

By then we were living in a plain whitewashed eighteenth-century house right on the rocks on Tyrella Beach in County Down. Austere and charming, all on its own. You breathed fresh salt air all day, surrounded by the Irish Sea; everything smelt of sweet seaweed. It was called the Watch House, because it had been built for the coastguard back in the day. The sitting room had once housed the boat they would launch to go out and catch smugglers; this, in the 1700s. Smugglers! When I was a child we



The Watch House at low tide. At high tide the sea came right up to the house. Note the windmill.

always seemed to be reading about smugglers or pirates.

Some of my best, albeit hazy, childhood memories are on that windy strand: behind us our white house, the tallest thing on the horizon. Michael, my little sister Juliet and I and our friends would play all kinds of games on the beach, and catch crabs and lobsters around the rocks with fencing wire at low tide.

My father was an officer in the Royal Irish Fusiliers; at that time his battalion was based a few miles down the road. The Irish Fusiliers we thought of as the family regiment. I later met two family members who'd also served with the regiment—an uncle of Dad's, Redmond Neill, and a cousin, Charlie Rattray. They had ramrod-stiff backs, and moustaches just like Dad's.

The Watch House was very isolated, but had electric lighting at least, with power wind-generated by a propeller on a pole and stored in car batteries indoors. There was no shortage of wind. Dad was not a practical man, and once had to replace the propeller, the good one having blown off onto the rocks. Coming back from Belfast, he forgot about the prop beam sticking forwards out of the car roof, drove into the garage and ripped the tiny Standard Ten almost in two in the process. Not a happy day. That was it for electricity. It was candles from then on.

Sometimes Dad would launch his notoriously unreliable clinker-built dinghy, with a Seagull outboard on the back, and we'd all go fishing out into the Irish Sea. That was the first of Dad's awful boats that I knew. Going out with him on the water often meant more of an adventure than you'd like, but we all survived over the years; nobody drowned. That was probably divine intervention rather than good seamanship on Dad's part. I loved adventures with Dad over all those years of my childhood, except when it came to reversing a boat trailer into the water. This usually meant a jack-knife of car and boat, in front of a crowd who would be more amused than helpful. Mortifying.

But when we were small at Tyrella, we children were all explorers. One of our haunts nearby was an unmarked archaeological site, which must have been a 'passage grave' of some kind, a souterrain; we were sure it had some defensive purpose. After entering you had to crawl under a large slab of rock, and an intruder doing so would be easily bashed on the head by a defender. A great place for children's gruesome games.

That souterrain triggered a lifelong interest in archaeology for me. Particularly in Ireland. I am fascinated, for instance, by Newgrange, a massive construction built on the River Boyne near the border. It was built hundreds of years before the Pyramids and Stonehenge. It seems to me a common failing of contemporary archaeology that anywhere there were buried bones is commonly labelled as a 'tomb'. Imagine uncovering Westminster Abbey in a few thousand years; it's full of bones, but is hardly a tomb. There were bones inside Newgrange, but it seems obvious to me that its mysterious builders had a more serious intent than burying a few chiefs. They were building the Womb of the World. Anyone with a passing knowledge of ancient religions knows they often would see the Earth as the Mother (Gaia, if you like), the Sky as the Father. Newgrange has a carefully constructed tunnel that aligns precisely so that on the shortest day of the year, midwinter, the rays of the sun shine on the very back wall. The deep interior. The builders were ensuring that the Earth Mother was impregnated at this critical moment, promising fertility and bounty, and a rich year to come. When I took a tour underground at Newgrange, I rather alarmed the guide with this theory, but he wouldn't yield. I still think I'm right.

Anyway, back to the Standard Ten. Dad must have used it to go to work, because Mum and the rest of us got about in a donkey and cart. Ginny was our donkey: very pretty but also very bad-tempered. We'd climb on the cart, and Mum would drive

Ginny down the beach to Ballykinlar to shop for our basics at the Naafi. That donkey hated being ridden, for all that we loved her, and ejected me once over a barbed-wire fence. My left knee still bears the scar.

In the distance, dominating the view at Tyrella, were the mesmerising blue Mountains of Mourne, directly across the bay. There's something about that silhouette, graceful and balanced, that haunts me to this day. As an adult I climbed to the highest peak. It was exhilarating up there. But then the clouds came in and I got very lost and disoriented on the way down.

At the foot of the mountains is a small town with the rather pedestrian name of Newcastle. Not much of a place, to be honest, but we would sometimes go there on an outing, and as a treat we'd share in the back seat some Edinburgh rock, a sort of crumbly confection that I thought was nirvana. I tried it many years later and it was simply disgusting—sickly sweet.

County Down remains a beautiful corner of Ireland. If there is an upside at all to the Troubles, it's that for the last sixty years or so there has been very little tourism and not a lot happening in the North. Much of it is just as I remember. The Irish coast: you can't beat it.

The first time I returned to Tyrella, I couldn't find my way to the beach along the narrow stone-walled lanes. I knocked on a little farmhouse door looking for help. There I stood, a grown man, more or less, who last was there aged seven, twenty-five years before.

The door opened, a woman smiled at me, and before I could open my mouth she said, 'You are one of the Neill boys, so you are.' I have never been more surprised. It happened that we small children used to walk up there and get our milk from her, in a can. But...how on earth could she have picked that?

After Tyrella, we lived in Armagh for a couple of years,

and the Watch House was our holiday place. Dad was CO at the army depot there. Here was my first school—Armagh Girls High School. I wore a blazer that read AGHS, which I had to be persuaded stood for Armagh *General* High School, since I had such antipathy for anything to do with girls.

I should remember more than I do of Armagh. We must have been the only children in the barracks, and we had the run of the place. I knew a lot of the men—and I'd very seriously salute the sentry as I came and went through the gates. Dad had a pack of beagles I'd hang out with after school, as well as the regimental mascot—a huge Irish wolfhound about three times my size. That poor, sweet-natured animal died cruelly of distemper while we were there, which broke my small heart.

There was an old tennis court in front of our house, and my brother and I played with our toy cars and soldiers there, as well as bashing a few balls. Down the hill towards the Mall is the site of the one and only remotely sectarian memory I have. My best friend, James Morris, and I ran down to watch a parade—it must have been 12 July—that we could hear in the distance. It sounded exciting, but as we got closer it became stranger and weirdly frightening. It was all loud drums and sweaty florid faces, orange sashes and bowler hats, and an alarming sense of common purpose that I'd never seen before. We ran away.

This was a peaceful time in the North; the Troubles were still some years away. I don't believe I ever heard the words 'Protestant' or 'Catholic', and if I had they wouldn't have meant anything to me. At least, not until we went to New Zealand. At my school it was important that we beat St Bede's, a Catholic school a few miles away, at rugby. Other than that, I have no comprehension of any of that bloody nonsense. None of it made sense, then or now, to me.

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Of course, it's possible I was simply too thick to pick up on all



that, but here's a story from Mum that 'rather disturbed' her. It tells you something, particularly about her. We were still living at the Watch House.

The sink had got bunged up, and I sent for the plumber from Downpatrick about eight miles away. I said to Helen, a girl of only sixteen who had come to help me when Madeline (the nanny) left. 'The plumber from Downpatrick is coming over, would you give him a cup of tea?'

'Is he Protestant or Catholic?'

I said, 'Helen, I have no idea, he's the plumber and he's coming to fix the sink.'

'I'd like to know before he comes.'

'There's no way we can find out, and anyway it doesn't matter—and you must make him a cup of tea.'

She was frightfully sulky, and when he had arrived I went into the kitchen and they were sitting as far away from each other as possible having their tea—not a word being spoken. Then as soon as he'd gone she said to me sharply, 'Was he a Protestant or a Catholic, did you find out?'

Fifty years later, the last time I was back at Tyrella, I was lucky that the owner of the Watch House was home. She and Michael had been friends as children when she lived in one of the little coastguard cottages nearby. Deirdre Dunseath was very kind, gave me tea, and over a cup told me that there were two things that Tyrella was known for.

The first was that Isambard Kingdom Brunel's grand revolutionary steamship the SS *Great Britain* beached there on her third voyage in 1846, and remained stranded for a year, not more than a few yards from the Watch House. Brunel floated her off eventually, but it meant ditching all her coal onto the beach. Indeed, I remember playing with that coal as a child; it was everywhere,

smooth and benignly round, having been worn by the sea for a hundred years.

I asked Deirdre what the other famous thing was. She said, like I was some kind of a fool, ‘Well. *You* lived here.’ Hardly in the same league, but it did tickle me.

She sold the Watch House recently, and we all thought about trying to buy it. But I eventually decided against it. It’d be too sad without Mum and Dad there. Ghosts or something. Best left there.

Some people you miss forever.

I often think about my feeling of connection with Ireland. I feel curiously at home there, and everything is comfortably familiar—the stone walls, the trees, the gentle hills, the smell of turf on a fire, the accents. Is this just sentimentality? I think not. It is more likely that my first seven years were there and that never leaves you. Or perhaps it is all in my DNA. Thousands of years of ancestors on my Irish side. Who knows? I build stone walls around my farm these days. They serve no practical purpose at all, but they make me feel good, and that’s enough.

Incidentally, I have played someone Irish on film only twice. The first was the somewhat creepy Mr Gentleman in Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* (1983), but he was possibly sort of British. The other was that hideous Ulsterman Major Campbell in *Peaky Blinders*. I never had more fun playing a character than him. Someone suggested I should apologise to some people from the North for that ‘grotesque caricature’, but I unreservedly do not.



The entirely loveable Major Campbell, *Peaky Blinders*.

# What on Earth Just Happened?

YOU might well ask, but in short I am ‘under the doctor’. Where does this expression come from? I think it’s Scottish, but I’m open to correction on this one. Not that I *like* being ‘under the doctor’, but I like the term. I am decidedly a man under the doctor.

At the beginning of March 2022 I flew to Los Angeles on matters *Jurassic*. About eight of the cast had an entire three-day weekend doing interviews, photo spreads for *Vanity Fair* and all of that stuff—publicity. It was a blast to catch up with my idiot friends and goof around as per. I noticed the glands seemed to be up in my neck region, but gave it very little thought. My agent had to kill a few photographs because my neck looked lumpy. Alan Grant doesn’t have a lumpy neck, it seems.

I flew back to Sydney to finish the television series *The Twelve*, but on a day off went to see my GP. I have great faith in him, but in this case he was a little conservative, maybe. I said, These lumps don’t seem to be going down, and I don’t know why. He assured me that my lumpy glands were due to undetected COVID, and they’d be hanging around for a little while. I went back a week later when they were even bigger. This time he sent me in to hospital for some tests.

I thought something might be amiss when a nurse was fooling around with an ultrasound under my chin. She suddenly dropped the tool and almost ran from the room. Pretty much immediately a doctor appeared and got to work with a very serious look

on her face. I tried a couple of jokes, but they fell a little flat. The next day I was sent in for a PET scan. This is one of those things where they fill you with run-off from Chernobyl so you are completely radioactive, and then insert you into a tunnel.

I was not to know the results of this test just yet, because I was flying to New Zealand the next morning. At last I was going home. I'd been separated from family for far too long and I couldn't wait.

That afternoon I was at my son Tim's house and my phone rang. It was my specialist doctor from the hospital, the haematologist Dr Lavee, and she did not have good news. She told me it was serious, very serious, and I needed to get back to Sydney right away. In short I had stage III angioimmunoblastic T-cell lymphoma. (I think I have that right.) This was apparently very serious indeed, although I'd never heard of such a thing. I couldn't be bothered looking it up on the net, it might have freaked me out, and anyway I was prepared to believe her. I told her that I wouldn't come back for a few days, that I hadn't been to my farm for months and I needed to sleep in my own bed, talk to my pets, plant something, be a farmer and a wine producer, even if it was only for a few days. I really needed to do that, and she understood.

But fly back I did, and within a few days I was lying on a hospital bed having all kinds of chemicals draining into my system, killing everything aboard. For therapeutic reasons. To be cured of a thing I didn't know I had just a few days ago.

Yep, suddenly things are different—this is some serious shit. But I was, and I remain, cheerful. I'm 'under the doctor', all right. I have faith in medicine. But the world has certainly turned upside down... That is what on earth just happened.

Personally, I can't wait to see what comes next. I will keep you posted.

# From the Beatles to Bill Nutt

NOT long ago, I was asked by Jim Mora on Radio New Zealand to name my favourite song of all time. I told him that was impossible. Music has been completely central to me all my life. I've loved countless songs.

But I could name the most important record ever for me.

Dad had an excellent LP collection, and was pretty sound on classical music. He loved a good orchestra and a great symphony but, oddly, I don't think my parents ever went to the Dunedin Town Hall to hear the symphony orchestra play. Mum had no real musical interest, but I was assured she was a nifty dancer in her day.

Michael, five years older, was for me more influential in this, as in so many other things. We had adjoining rooms at home, with only a curtain between us, and I'd listen to the stuff he liked. He was something of a beatnik in his early years at Otago University, wore duffel coats, affected a pipe and got as close to a Caesar cut as his wavy hair would permit. Naturally, he inclined towards blues, gospel and jazz. Nina Simone, Miles Davis, Sonny Boy Williamson, Thelonious Monk, Mahalia Jackson, Stanley Turrentine. The best. I still love all that. And one day I might make the argument that fifties jazz was the absolute zenith of American culture. Which has been in slow decline ever since.

Michael left home for Cambridge University when I was about fifteen, and I was then free to make my own collection and follow my own proclivities. He left his record player behind. The



first record I ever bought was 'Nut Rocker' by B. Bumble and the Stingers, when I was maybe ten. It's a curiosity but, if you listen to it and the changes it makes, you can picture, bent over a spinning disc, a shy boy beginning to find his own taste. I also thought it was funny. I think a little humour goes a long way in life and work, and I've always tried to play even the darkest characters with some element of comedy. At least I think so.

I started reading good books as a teenager. And listening to music at the same time. I read the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy listening to the soundtracks of Kenny Burrell and Elmer Bernstein.

The early 1960s were a low point in rock/pop music. A lot of sappy crooners, mostly called Bobby. But then, at exactly the right time for me, something magical and transformative happened. The Beatles turned up. I was fifteen when they arrived on our radio, and twenty-two when they broke up. I was formed, grew into a man, to a Beatles soundtrack.

Of course, I loved the Stones, the Kinks, Hendrix, Cocker and many others. But the Beatles were the bee's nuts. I had my first dance with an actual living breathing girl, Julia Hall, to 'I Saw Her Standing There' in her family's sitting room, by the Avon in Fendalton.

It's hard to conceive now how important they were then. Each record they made was strides ahead of the last, and on the day of release we'd rush off to Begg's to buy it, and sprint to the bus to hear it at home. Couldn't wait. And what a revelation they'd be. Impossible, you'd think. How good could a band be? I still maintain there will never be better.

So my answer to Jim Mora was this. *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. I was nineteen when it came out. On first hearing the title song I could hardly breathe in amazement. The *Pepper's* LP is perhaps the greatest rock record ever made and was utterly

revolutionary. It looked back to the past, but propelled us into a future where anything was possible.

If proof were needed of the importance of my favourite band, almost everyone I know thought watching *The Beatles: Get Back* was their most profound experience of recent times. Everyone with any taste, that is.

How did I afford to buy records back then? I didn't get pocket money, except at Christ's College, where I was a boarder from thirteen. There we all got two shillings a week. That was enough for four crumpets with honey at little Miss Cottrell's school tuckshop. It was at College, incidentally, that some miserable bastard decided that we were not to be allowed to see the Beatles when they played in Christchurch in 1964.

Otherwise, we were encouraged to get jobs in the holidays. I was twelve when I got my first paying job. I did all sorts. I put jam into tarts in a cake shop in the Exchange Building in Dunedin. I emptied rubbish bins at the camping grounds at St Kilda. What came out of those bins you wouldn't believe. I was an assistant greenkeeper on the golf course at Balmacewen. I was a shop assistant, wearing a tie, in an appliance store. I lumped timber round in a yard near the railway station.

These and other jobs taught me so much. You have to bloody work to make a bloody quid. The world is more diverse than you'd suspect in a boarding school in Christchurch. Keep your head down, and you stay out of trouble. Humour comes in many forms. Respect the worker. Find your allies. Listen carefully to instructions. Be grateful for a pay packet.

We carried on with holiday jobs once I went on to university. For three summers in a row, initially with friends like Pip Hall and Gerse Halliday, I went to Ashburton, then a somewhat desolate small town fifty miles south of Christchurch. We worked at Burnett's Motors, a haulage firm that operated all over

the Mid Canterbury plains. They needed students in the summer to lift hay bales and stack them with precision in sheds. It was heavy, dusty, hard work. A decent lucerne bale could weigh up to eighty pounds. As a non-sporty, weedy type, I had to toughen up fast. It took a couple of weeks for your hands to harden enough with calluses so you could get through a day's work without them bleeding. Since I have always suffered from hay fever, this was all counterintuitive. I sneezed the whole summer.

But I outlasted all my friends, none of whom did three whole seasons. I loved summer in Mid Canterbury, and I hated it too. It was flat, monotonous and bloody dry. But there, in the far distance, were the Southern Alps under a clear blue sky, a little snow on the tops and the promise of adventure. Fishing, skiing, hiking...all the things I'd been brought up to love.

Near the base of the mountains was a little town called Methven. It had two pubs—the Brown Pub and the Blue Pub. In one or the other, the old hands swore that they had a raffle on Saturday nights. The prize was a dozen beers, or half an hour upstairs with the barmaid. Apparently, if you were sensible you took the beer. I have no idea if this is true and never went there in the name of research.

The regular drivers in Ashburton rolled their eyes when a batch of new uni students arrived at Burnett's. Useless soft pricks. Bloody longhairs. You'd get picked by the drivers, rather like in games at school. Once you'd done a few weeks and had got the hang of things, you'd be first off the rank. You were useful. You knew how to make a twelve-high haystack that wouldn't fall over.

We would turn up at all sorts of farms. Some were almost landed gentry, with stately old homesteads. I'd recognise names from boarding school. You never saw the nobs; they were too grand by half for common truckies like us. Some were old bachelors whose dilapidated faces and houses beggared belief. The houses we

liked the best were those where a nice farmer's wife would come out at smoko with thermoses of tea and fresh warm scones with jam. We were so starved we'd almost weep in gratitude.

Very occasionally, we'd get invited into a warm kitchen to sit around the table. This always fascinated me. I would closely observe the old drivers here. Outside these were hard men: hard swearing, hard drinking, proud working-class men. But inside a kitchen, a woman's domain, they were reduced to shy, mumbling children. They'd smoke with their tea, while silently staring at the floor, but ash their cigarettes on their trousers so as not to muck up the place. Uncle Hec in *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* owes a lot to these blokes.

You'd often be the target of ribbing from some of the old drivers and full-time offsidiers. Mostly good-natured, but sometimes not. One bloke in particular, not much older than me, who could conjugate the word fuck in any number of ways, and never said a sentence without at least ten fucks in a row, picked on me for a few days. I was patient and said nothing, but it didn't abate. One day he persisted in hitting me on the back of my bare legs with heavy hay bales when my back was turned, time and again. He was throwing bales onto the truck where I was stacking. It wasn't going to stop, and eventually I'd had enough. When it happened for about the tenth time, instead of stacking the bale, I picked it up and waited until he turned *his* back. And then, with pinpoint accuracy, I hoisted the bale into the air and hurled it at his head. It flattened him and winded him at the same time.

When he stood up, I was pointing right in his face. 'Don't ever fucking do that again, you cunt!' This was language he understood. I never had a peep out of him after that.

Along with seemingly everyone in Ashburton, he had false teeth. Perhaps this was common all over New Zealand. For your twenty-first birthday, your parents would give you a free trip

to the dentist, who would pull out all your teeth and give you dentures in return. This was seen as a supremely generous act of common sense. It would save you a fortune, now that you were a grown-up: a lifetime of never having to see the dentist again.

Mind you, every child in the country had suffered trauma in the past at the malicious hands of dental nurses. Every primary school of any size had one. I had a couple of terms at Cashmere Primary in Christchurch when we first arrived back in New Zealand, in the mid-1950s. There was a small wooden building which almost seemed radioactive. At playtime kids would steer well clear, for inside dwelt the wicked dental nurse. She got me in her clutches at some point. I had never had a tooth cavity in my life, but she somehow found twelve. These needed immediate attention. She had a foot-propelled drill, grindingly slow and utterly agonising. No anaesthetics.

Ashburton, dull as it was, was also liberating for university students like us. We shared flats for the first time. Freedom! We drank, smoked and ate disgusting food. It was pretty foul. Sometimes a girl or two would visit, but they wouldn't stay long. Who could blame them? If we'd had a good week and worked overtime, we'd hitchhike to Christchurch and party for the weekend to celebrate. And do the same stupid things there. When I think of our idiotic behaviour, I shudder. No one thought twice about driving blind drunk. I couldn't afford a car, so that wasn't me, but I was often in the back seat.

Not all of us made it. Here's a story I wrote for the *Press* in Christchurch about someone who didn't.

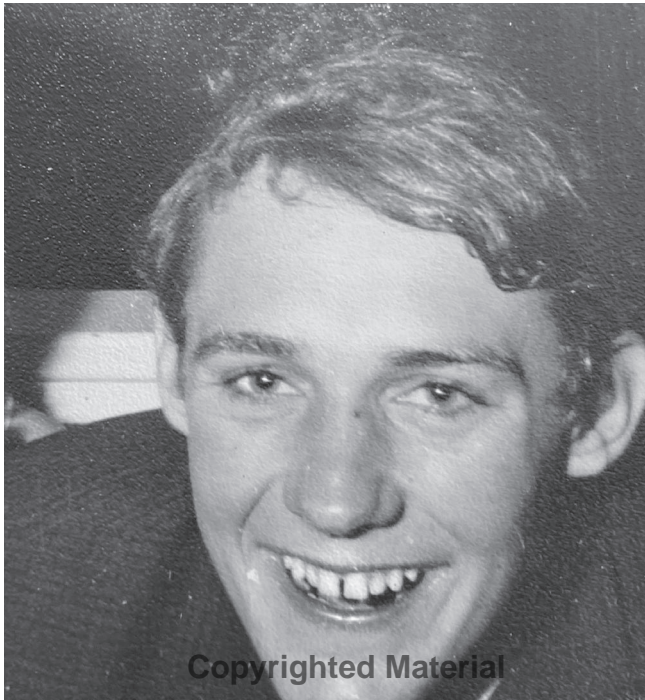
## A Christchurch Love Story

I love a good love story, and this is one. It is also a true story. It's about my old friend Nigel Nutt.

We first met at school in Christchurch. We were eleven years old.

Almost immediately he became my best friend. In part I think we bonded because we were both called Nigel. It's not a great name, Nigel. So we changed our names. We liked Westerns and in Westerns people were called things like Sam. So I became Sam and he became Bill. We never looked back. What an excellent decision that turned out to be: you can NOT have a career in movies and be called Nigel Neill.

But it was far more than that. He was the funniest person I'd ever met. He didn't tell jokes—he was a joke, everyone was a joke, the world was a joke. He was fun. Everybody loved Bill Nutt. And we stayed the closest of friends right up until we left boarding school. We shared studies, I'd go to his farm on Sundays. We did pretty much everything together.



My old friend Nigel Nutt, brilliant fool.



We were in plays. He was the most naturally gifted comic actor I've ever worked with (with the possible exception of Robin Williams, but it's bloody close). He could do pratfalls and double takes before we knew what they were. We found girlfriends about the same time. Girls loved Bill. He was kind of goofy looking, but he could charm the birds from the trees. He made them laugh. And a party never really started until Bill turned up.

Then school finished, and Bill went home to the farm at Tai Tapu.

One crazy party night, another crazy party night, Bill went to sleep driving home. The car went off the road, and Bill flew through the windscreen at God-knows-what speed. And that was it for parties. That was that for everything. The life of the party was struggling to stay alive. He was in a coma for about four months, and then gradually he woke up. Very gradually. He couldn't speak, he couldn't do anything much. He was in hospital for months and months more—how he had survived at all, no one knew. Gradually he got better, but never entirely. He spoke slowly and in a monotone. He walked eventually, but very poorly. He went home and he knew he would never be the same. It was cruel.

He plunged into a deep, deep depression. Eventually he tried suicide. He failed—the bullet went the wrong way. The world was dark and very sad.

But then after a few years, he found the Laura Fergusson Home. And that's when everything began to change. His memory began to return. His inimitable sense of humour came back. And best of all, he became happy again. I'd go and see Bill as often as I could when I got back from abroad. I cannot tell you how happy I was to find him there. And how touched I was by how genuinely cared for he was there.

They loved Bill. They really dug him.

And he found a job. He was the gate man at the bridge as you cross the river to the hospital. He'd sit there all day, smoking endless cigarettes, joking dryly to the nurses, doctors and patients who had passed by. He was loved there too. To the best of my knowledge, he never turned anyone away.

And then something else miraculous happened. He fell in love. She lived at Laura Fergusson too. For me this was the best love story of all. They were utterly devoted to each other. She was sweet, he was funny; it was magic. I mean, it'd make you cry to watch it. She gave his life meaning, and he did the same for her. They only separated when Bill died. That was more than twenty years ago now.

I still miss Bill. I loved him too. We all did. And I am eternally grateful to the Laura Fergusson Brain Injury Trust—everyone who worked there, for the care and the love they gave all those years to my friend.

# The B Word

I'VE enjoyed excellent health all my life. Up until now.

This hasn't been through any particularly good behaviour on my part. I've never been much of a fitness freak, and I only go to the gym under sufferance. If I have to get fit for a part, for instance. Gyms are not my idea of a good time. All that groaning and sweating. Many years ago I used to go to the City Gym in Darlinghurst. This was, for an observer of humanity like me, rather a fascinating place. There was an extraordinary mix of all sorts in there. There were obvious gangsters and enforcers, from Kings Cross. You never caught their eye. There were immense men clearly on huge doses of steroids who could barely walk because of their enormous thighs. You never caught their eye either. There were large gay guys who were dainty and muscular at the same time. They were known as Muscle Marys, and sometimes if you were on the next machine you'd hear them talking about how they would be fucking up on the weekend.

Around that time, there was a night when I felt that my future wife, Noriko, and I were under some kind of threat from a bunch of drunk people. I thought that perhaps I should learn something more than just how to stay out of trouble; something about self-defence. I found someone who could help me with that, and we would go and train in a nearby park. He was a cop who would moonlight as security in some pretty rough joints. He knew what to do under the conditions. And so do I, now. It's a dark art. Don't cross me, that's my advice. I'm a dangerous man!

He wasn't a big guy, nor was his brother, who, like him, was a cop, Lebanese and very useful. This story about his brother has never left me. One Saturday afternoon he was, unaccountably, the only security on duty at one of those huge garden pubs in the west of Sydney. Out of nowhere, a whole motorcycle gang roared up. To the mutual horror of all the drinkers there, they sauntered into the place amid terrified silence, and ordered beers. Our friend was dismayed when management told him that they wanted the bikers to leave the premises, and that he was the one who had to tell them to do so. He pulled himself up to his full five foot six, braced himself and quietly asked them to go. This was not received well, and the next thing he knew his back was against the bar and a semicircle of hairy bikers was closing in. He was about to get the shit beaten out of him.

And this is where quick thinking and drastic measures come in. He'd already identified the leader. Quick as a flash, he grabbed him and put him in a headlock. With his other hand he hooked into one of the man's eyes, and pulled out the eyeball on the end of its stalk.

But this was the clincher. With the bikie screaming in the headlock, and the eyeball between his fingers, he looked up, and told them all to fuck off.

And laughed!

It was the laugh that did it. They were dealing with a psycho. He dropped the man to the floor, and his mates picked him up and departed.

Anyway, back to me and my health. I don't think I can be fairly accused of being a hypochondriac. No more than the next man. But at one point in the 1980s I was working in Toronto and went to the production-approved doctor on a day off, convinced I had bowel cancer and was about to die. I explained to the doctor that I'd taken a couple of decent craps that day and to my horror

the lavatory bowl was bright red. It could be nothing but blood. I clearly had mere weeks to live.

The doctor asked me if by any remote chance I'd eaten beetroot lately. I thought for a second, and then I said, 'That's absolutely right. Some nice people had asked me to lunch and served beetroot, something I'd never liked but was surprisingly delicious. I think I'd had three or four helpings on the strength of it.'

With the practised air of a patient man, he said, 'Well, that will be it, then, won't it.'

Oh, the relief.

And then he said, 'On looking at my notes, I see that you saw me last year, and at that time you were convinced you'd had a major heart attack. It was, in fact, not a coronary, but heartburn. And I prescribed Rennies.'

I blushed, muttered, 'Thank you, doctor,' and got my coat.

I have to say here that I like doctors, and I have great faith in modern medicine. It seems extraordinary, for instance, in this modern age, that you have to say you are pro-vaccination. It seems incredible to me that the whole business of inoculation has come under doubt during the pandemic when we know with absolute certainty that this side of medicine has saved countless lives over my lifetime, including, I have no doubt, my own. We don't have to fear mumps, rubella, measles, whooping cough, polio—all the diseases that could have killed or maimed us, all the diseases that petrified our parents. Simply because, since I was a kid, they developed vaccines, and these things largely disappeared.

A few years ago, my life did come under threat in the oddest way. My regular blood check detected a disease without any symptoms whatsoever. I'm sure you will have never heard of it—nor had I. It is called haemochromatosis. It's something you might inherit, and I've warned my children about it. It is