

# **ALGAE**

**Jim Lemon**

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To my parents

I would like to thank my mother-in-law for inadvertently providing the idea, my wife for inadvertently setting me on the way to writing it down and those who smoothed off some of the rough edges.



## Part 2 - Algae

### Surrounded by Nature

If you found yourself in the sylvan hamlet of Rump Creek and decided to walk west along the two ruts – that passed for a road in good weather – you would experience a languid exhibition of nature. Your feet would fall between towering columns of beech, brush box and quandong, some with strips of old, dull bark peeling away to reveal bright green and orange layers beneath. Your nose would be teased by whiffs of fragrant oils that slowly escaped from the leaves and flowers to either side and high above. You would have to duck as you passed beneath a booyong that had stretched upwards to catch the light and lost its grip on the damp earth. Like a boom gate stuck at half-mast, it had yet to be sawn through to clear the way for anything less agile than a pedestrian. Its peak was already curving upwards in the hope of continuing its ascent. The trunks of trees that had gone before it lay festooned with slow, untidy fungi in the carpet of litter, adding pungent highlights to the odours of the living. The buzz and whine of insects pursuing their daily lives would form the background for the incomprehensible mirth of a kookaburra or the darker humour of a lyrebird imitating chainsaws and logging trucks.

You would only have to travel about a kilometre to reach a letterbox with 'UTOPIA' boldly painted upon it. A grand name like this is not uncommon in this area. Neither is the somewhat ambiguous message to be drawn from such a name. If it suited you to follow the fainter path that curved into the woods, you would soon reach a little house. Like the name, it was typical of

many of the dwellings in the area, clad with weatherboards of varying provenance and roofed with recycled corrugated iron. A wooden plaque echoing the letterbox was fixed next to the single door.

The journey described above had just been completed by a man of an above-average height, slightly greying brown hair and beard, framing a passably handsome face. He called himself Algae. His T-shirt was faded and darkened in places with the perspiration raised by even such a modest walk in the steaming heat of northern New South Wales. He held a letter in one hand that he had retrieved from the letterbox. He frowned at it as the bright orange door made way for his entry.

As letters did not arrive on a daily basis, Algae was usually pleased to find one in the suitably rustic letterbox: a discarded can of lubricating fluid that had a slot fashioned in the front and a hinged door on the rear. The letterbox itself brought a little glow of satisfaction to him, for his creativity in making it was enhanced by its obviously non-commercial manufacture. What really educed that pulse of contentment was the fact that it had been the first thing in his life that had grabbed his imagination and wouldn't let go until he brought it into reality.

## A chance inspiration

As he had almost no idea how to do it, he approached a retired panel beater who produced little ornaments from old tin cans to sell at local shops and fairs. Con sat in his flea market stall, a canopy that folded out from the back of his flatbed truck like the shade from an old pram. Behind the table with the sign 'Metalmorphosis' on the front, Con's squinted eyes peered out through spectacles of a bygone age beneath a pinstriped workman's cap. A dentist's nightmare of discoloured teeth clung grimly to his gums above his magnificent white beard.

'Letterbox, eh? They won't be easy to sell. There's a lot of work in that and the ones in the shops are so cheap. I did make one from an old milk jug just for meself.'

'I don't want to sell them. I just thought it would be really great demonstration of recycling. See, the oil can is mass produced to store a fossil fuel product for motor vehicles that embody the whole cycle of consumption and waste...'

'Sure, I get all that, but people want something unusual. Letterboxes are all over the place. First they gotta want it and then you can tell 'em all about the recycling before the novelty wears off.'

Algae scanned the array of little animals and garden tools and furniture surrounding Con on the table of his little stall. Finished in a rainbow of transparent colours, they brought to mind those tricks of light and viewpoint that make people say, 'Doesn't that look like a bear', except that Con was able to make them see the bear before they saw the old tin can.

'Look, I just saw this can and I thought it would be a great idea to make it into a letterbox.'

'Yeah, I know what you mean. First put yer oil can away and get some old food tins. Make some little bowls like these until you can do it without splitting the metal. Got any hammers and

snips?’

Con showed him how to use blocks of soft wood to shape the thin metal while telling him about the exotic cars he had repaired. Algae tapped away on old food tins until he got the knack of where to hit the metal to get the bulge or hollow that he imagined. He learned to focus his mind on what he was doing instead of letting it wander off to something more entertaining. He made a drawing of what he wanted and slowly shaped the slot in the bottom end. He cut the top off and hinged it back inside at an angle so that the rain wouldn’t run inside. He attached the flat spring from a broken clothes’ peg to the bottom as a latch so that he could open and close it with the metal handle on the lid. When he showed it to Con, the old panel beater said it was a fine piece of work and he ought to get into the game.

‘I hope ya don’t mind me sayin’ so, but when ya first asked me, I didn’t think ya’d finish it. A lot of folks say they want to make somethin’ themselves but hardly any of them even get started. That deserves a good paint job. Get a good coat of primer on it and let it bloody dry. Then put yer enamel on it. And use a brush. Ya don’t want to be puffin’ away like me from all the coats of acrylic I’ve put on me lungs with spray guns.’

When he finally screwed the finished letterbox to the post, he had sunk next to the road, all the disappointments of the things he had tried to make when he was younger were pushed aside by that enduring glow of satisfaction that he had finally done something right.

## The end of an era

The letter he had received was of noticeably higher quality than the others that had found their way to the old oil can. It had the look of everything that Algae steadfastly disliked: a custom printed envelope with a string of names on the return address. His former name, Algernon Barnsworth, led the geographic list that described his current location well enough to find him.

Inside the house was a woman named Lamarelle, the long-time partner of Algae. She was just that bit younger than he was, suggesting a youthful passion that had endured. Algae and Lamarelle have mellowed from an alternative fringe couple to what most people who have managed to stay married for a decade or two become. Algae wrote articles for periodicals adhering to suitably radical political ideas and collected enough benefits to keep himself and Lamarelle in basic comfort. The additional income provided by his writing and Lamarelle's cooking and practice – of what she called 'evidence-based astrology' – paid for their occasional excursions and special purchases. Lamarelle, dressed in her summer at-home attire of a loose t-shirt that had been stretched down to her knees, looked up from her cooking. Two rows of jars full of a brown substance were cooling before their trip to the little cellar built into the slope behind the house where they would rest until a desire for chutney summoned them. Even though the labels had been carefully removed, a practiced eye could guess what their original contents had been. What had replaced those sauces and pickles would reliably bring a few dollars at local markets with 'Lam's Jams' at the top of their hand-lettered labels. She beckoned him toward her and greeted him with a kiss.

"Did you remember the pepper?"

Algae put on a look of surprise and then pulled the little container from his pocket with a grin.

“Oh, there’s a letter!”

His father Lionel had cherished great hopes for his son, but these foundered upon the intersection of his son’s adolescence and the moral lassitude that emerged during Algernon’s expensive upbringing. The young man flirted with oriental religion, professed drastically unworkable politics, and took up moderately illegal intoxicants. He had been taunted with the nickname ‘Algae’ at Cromleigh Grammar and adopted it as an act of defiance to both his tormentors and his parents. His parents had nicknamed him ‘Algy’, and merely by hardening the G, he turned his nickname into a rebuke. He began to introduce himself as ‘the humblest greenie’ and wholeheartedly embarked upon a career of opposition to just about everything.

Lionel Barnsworth had despaired of his son but never disowned him. He was sure that one day Algernon would return, having travelled the intellectual path he had chosen and ready to begin real life. Algae outlasted him, for Lionel passed away at the age of 75, disappointed that he had not been able to wait long enough.

“From some lawyers in Sydney.”

Despite his dislike of the format, the news that his father had died broke through the years of cultivated disdain, and his eyes closed for a moment. A chorus of half-planned words never spoken or written whispered in his head with no one to hear them. He recovered his composure and announced to Lamarelle that the old man had finally carked it.

## Moving homeward

The train had rhythmically rattled down the coast, leaving the fields of stolid cows and regimented crops to display the towns and suburbs merging together. Finally, it slid into an expanse of platforms, and an echoing, unintelligible voice announced his arrival. Grasping his old gym bag filled with what he had decided was necessary, Algae emerged from the train. He walked up the platform to the spacious hall and found a large map that provided directions. Upon attending the offices of Marley, Wimsett, Howell, and Anatopoulos, he was informed that a bequest had been made to a certain Samantha Keene, a rather young woman who had been the comfort of his father's sunset years. Algae had been left the family house, an Italianate pile of some twenty rooms on the waterfront. The remainder of the hefty estate was available for the maintenance of the house, in which Algae could live out his days. He could apply to Mr Beauchamp, an accountant of his father's acquaintance, for any funds needed for maintaining the house. Mr Anatopoulos waited for Algae to ask how much money he had been left and was astonished when he merely replied "Okay" and asked if he could have the keys. He was directed to Mr Beauchamp for them. Before he left, Algae asked if he could use the telephone as he didn't own a mobile. Mr Anatopoulos indicated the one on the desk, and Algae rang the local store at Rump Creek with a message for Lamarelle that she should come to the shop, and he would ring her there later in the afternoon.

Algae walked across town with the address of Mr Beauchamp's office in his hand – another piece of fancy paper with the contact details of Marley, Wimsett, Howell and Anatopoulos discreetly printed across the bottom. Everything was holding his youth under his nose. His father used to take him somewhere around here to buy his uniforms with that damned tie

that he could never get right. The shop was probably gone now, replaced by a boutique or one of the cafés that lined the street; their tables were fashionably crowding the footpath. He watched a man sitting at one of those tables, his attention fixed on a mobile telephone. His concentration was palpable as he tapped his index finger on the screen. Somewhat older than Algae, his wavy grey hair, attire, and handsome face signalled a moderately successful life. Was this what he might have become? Sending some message to his wife, daughter, mistress with one of these electronic tablets that Algae disdained? Trying to keep up with the times? He moved on, satisfied that he had avoided such a fate.

On the corner ahead, he could see someone sitting on a milk crate. The stream of pedestrians swirled as it passed him as if an invisible barrier had been erected to divert them around this obstacle. As the footpath was wide, people were threading around each other without any real attempt to establish a division between the east and west bound. Each person's progress became more circuitous, some walking out onto the street for a few steps. There had been one or two other beggars propped against the stone or tile facings of the buildings, but they had not created such a detour for the passers-by. Algae moved out towards the gutter and surveyed the setup as he passed. On each side of the milk crate was a heap of bedding, plastic bags, clothing and other possessions. Signs were stuck to the wall behind him, detailing his complaints and demands. Their creator sat upright on a folded blanket on top of the milk crate, swinging his bearded face back and forth to catch any eye contact that might occur. His eyes met Algae's for a second but snapped away as Algae kept walking. Algae was sure that he wouldn't leap up and accost him, for that would be too much of a public disruption to be disregarded by the police.

Like the windscreen washers skipping between the lines of stopped cars, people paid him to stay away or as an offering to some invisible god of fortune within them. *Let me keep doing okay; let my little sacrifice keep the bad luck from sticking to me.* Instead of slumping behind a single sign, he calculated the maximum amount of obstruction he was allowed to make while waiting for donations that landed onto the gold coins he had arranged in the box between his feet. Maybe he didn't even care about the coins and just wanted to make all those people move around him. Algae had never been able to fit begging into his grand scheme for society. It worried him, for what if begging persisted when you had levelled out society? Like all those other wicked problems of crime and craziness, what if it didn't disappear? It was always like this on his forays out of Rump Creek. People whom he had to move into a holding space until he could find them a place in the harmonious society where everyone worked for the common good. He kept walking past the fancy shops. They could be squeezed into a better form that would fit in, and beggars couldn't. He tried to imagine the man with the mobile phone and the obnoxious beggar together in the perfect society. It only set off what he called his *ridiculum*, an imaginary part of his brain that turned things into crazy, fun-mirror parodies of their reality. The two cartoon characters, now both dressed in identical pyjamas, waved their mobile phones and called each other made-up names like 'dignity thief'. He shook his head and kept walking.

He stood on the footpath, assessing the building before him – one of a group of three, overshadowed by towering blocks of offices or apartments. The place was probably more than a hundred years old, dark bricks and blocks of sandstone lending what used to be a classy, business-like appearance all those years ago. A nameplate of sandstone set into the brickwork above the door identified it as 'Beltran'. He refused to take the venerable

elevator and climbed up the spiral of stairs that curved around it. Room 302, A.B. Beauchamp, Accountant. He entered the modest room. A young fellow in a striped shirt and tie stood up behind a desk.

“Mr Barnsworth?”

“Um, yes, just call me Algae.”

“Sure, my name’s Art.”

He reached across the desk and shook Algae’s hand. Algae noticed that there was a little garbage can on the desk decorated with a metal plaque that read ‘Smart Art’. Probably some kind of in-joke among accountants. Art took the opportunity to study the man behind one of the most interesting tasks he had been given. Taller than he was, he had yet to fill out as so many men of his age did. He guessed that this was a benefit of his limited resources, for he had been given a brief account of his adult life by Algae’s father, whom he had known for a year or two. He had expected his scruffy appearance and the hair, growing however it liked and only trimmed to keep it out of the way. It was such a contrast to the current fashion of sharply defined patches of hair and stubble that it drew the eye as one of the more fanciful coiffures did. Algae scanned the desk between them as if seeking some obscure clue that would give the master detective the answer to the puzzling case. He looked up and surprised Art with an impression of closely guarded likeability.

“Please have a seat. I suppose that Mr Anatopoulos has explained the situation to you.”

“Sort of. I’ve been left my father’s house, and you are the one who provides the money for the upkeep.”

“Basically, yes. It’s a bit more complicated, as these things often are. Your father wanted you to have the opportunity to live in Sydney if you wish.”

“What if I don’t want to live here?”

“That is your choice. Your father’s instructions were that you could live in the house for as long as you care to. His words were: ‘The door should always be open to him.’”

“Yeah, he was always saying that. What if I want to sell it?”

“Unfortunately, you can’t. If you are certain that you don’t want the house, it will go to Ms Keene.”

“Who is this Ms Keene anyway?”

“She was your father’s companion for the past five years.”

“I’ll bet. Never knew he had it in him.”

In fact, Algae knew well that he had it in him but was not about to admit it. Lionel always had an eye for the ladies in an old-fashioned way, and his mother had often joked that she had to watch him because all the girls were after him. While he was happy to show his disdain for the presumed romantic rewards that material success had brought his father, he had always secretly admired his charming manner and sense of humour. *Hmmm, five years. At least he had waited until Mum died before taking some floozy in.* Algae did recall his son mentioning a young woman staying with his father in a letter he had written a couple of years ago.

“So, I’ve got to live in that pretentious palace if I want to have it, huh? Terrible place. It was like living in a museum. Paintings, sculpture, all the trappings of...wealth.”

He had almost said ‘obscene wealth’ as he had often used the phrase to distance himself from it. You had to be careful about your past when promoting ideas like everyone having the same amount of money.

“Oh, you’re free to redecorate it. I can assure you that there are sufficient funds to modify the place to suit you. In fact, you don’t even have to deal with the tradesmen. I will manage any changes you wish to make.”

“So, what am I supposed to live on down here?”

“Your father’s instructions were that you could earn as much as you like. As long as you or Ms Keene occupy the property, the remainder of the estate is available to maintain or improve it.”

“Well, I suppose I should at least have a look at the place.”