

TALKINGS And Incongruous Thoughts

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by

John Hepher

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## And Incongruous Thoughts

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person either living or deceased, or any event, is coincidence.

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THE QUEENSTOWN CONSPIRACY.

THE SECESSION.

THE BIGGER THEY ARE  
THE HARDER WE FALL.

RESEARCH CORRUPTED.

THREADING THE NEEDLE.

BUT WHAT IF THE TRUTH BE  
TOLD?

ARCHIE'S WORDS.

PARALLEL.



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To Bob Grant.

Thank you for our Talkings.



## CHAPTER 1

I am Jack. I have a friend, Lewis. We talk. And we claimed it our privilege to talk, sometimes seriously venting our opinions and our frustrations, sometimes not so seriously, but always with passion. We are passionate men.

To debate, to criticise, to question?

Yes, it *is* our privilege. Our *right*, and our rite. Just like a religion, of which neither of us has, although, like most of our cohort, we were born into a religion until religion lost its' way, or we did; I could never reconcile God.

It is our privilege, indeed our right, to assert our debating rites as aging, still mostly articulate men. Well, at our own level at least; we are not

academics, although some people junior to us would say, and have done so, that we are merely ‘pub intellectuals’, some (unkindly) say smart-arses. Maybe they think it is because of our ability to count to ten and to be able to divide it by three without referring to a calculator, and remember all the words to ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’ (some were not as advanced in mathematics or literature), and Lewis could even remember *every* word of ‘Alice’s Restaurant’, and had won many beers for reciting the entire nineteen minutes of it at Poetry in the Pub.

Our long term memories are still mostly intact.

The short term memory? That is sometimes another issue. Lately, my recollection of words seems to go into recess at the most inconvenient times, and we knew the short term memory - regardless of real recall capacity, was a finite thing and becoming more finite with each passing week.

We, Lewis and I, are much closer to mort, than naissance. It is simple arithmetic. And there is the divide, the crossing of every man’s

Rubicon when he comes to that specific point of no return, and at that point, the greater awareness of his mortality, as much as he tries to deny it, becomes suddenly more apparent. But it had been creeping up on us for a long time. Middle-age transmogrifies into the youth of old age, and there could be a very rapid transition from there, to the onset of actual old age (I suppose that being the acceptance of it). And it is all downhill from there to the grave.

The full stop of one's life, one's existence. The little black dot. The eulogy. Then, the headstone. But I suppose we are lucky, some have not reached our chronological milestones, dying, as they have, early. But then again, they didn't have to face our dilemmas of advancing age. Did they?

It is a funny thing how time plays tricks with the psyche. Why is it I think like I am twenty years old, but bodily I am a decrepit shadow of my former self? I still see me, feel me, as young. It is a perception that persists to lull me, and Lewis too, into a false sense of security, only for the inevitable injury or fatigue to set in from simply doing the things we have always done.

And with a certain amount of sadness it is a certain once proud but now feeble and flaccid appendage which brings me, and I dare say Lewis, back to our reality.

And there's another funny thing, we discuss all manner of subjects but that of the limp dick? No! And of death? Equally no.

But it is our job as older men, our duty even, to chew our verbal cud, to expound on theories and even fact, and even, alternative fact: someone in America had recently invented alternative fact. I suppose alternative fact to go with alternative truth and fake news and comb-over fake hair.

Fake news? And I thought truth *was* truth, there is no alternative, and could it be this so-called alternative truth is just a euphemism for a lie? But of course it is.

A lie to argue? No, not to argue; to debate.

Fact? Yes fact, a fluid concept as we now know it, or as it has appeared to us lately.

Lately?

Lately. Is lately a thing that is relative? Lately could be any time in the last thirty years, maybe forty. Or yesterday. Fact, or someone's interpretation of it, I noticed, is drip-fed to us, through an ever expanding, ever voracious media with so many more words to say, which say so much less.

There is too much space to fill, and so little meaningful content to fill the space. So they invent or speculate. The column inches, the seconds of air time, the minutes, and now there are rapidly decreasing budgets to pay the rapidly depleting numbers of the journalists who nose out the real stories.

We argued, no; *debated* the merits of the various sources of information and their places in the order of merit of believability.

Yes, fake news? Yes. The inventiveness of the infomercial and the advertorial. That'll make 'em think. That'll be educational. And now there's the opinion phenomenon.

Lots of so-called or self-proclaimed experts.

Lots of opinion.

Lots, and lots, of opinion.

And we, Lewis and I, had also come to the realisation that that same media, or most of it, did not, *in fact*: spruik fact. But they are good, very good, at making it appear as such aren't they? They even have university degrees in it. Or so I have been told.

B.Bs? Bachelor of Bullshit.

Why is it so? I wondered, as I waited for Lewis, my mate, my brother, my comrade, Lewis. And here was more subject matter for debate.

Lewis is my verbal sparring partner. And we spar. We spar every afternoon from four o'clock until six when regardless of a consensus (or not), on the subject of the day which was usually gleaned from a news report or some catastrophe or tragedy, then we would leave for our modest homes, where we both lived alone, agreeing to disagree, or at times agreeing, but not often. The tragedy of the demise of Cricket is a current debate, batsmen who can't think or concentrate

beyond one hundred and twenty balls. Twenty overs ferfucksake!

And the catastrophe of the rise of labour hire companies, the abrogation of responsibility for the welfare of a worker by his or her perceived employer. When in reality, the worker is not sure if he or she is employed by the company at the address at which he or she toils, or is their employer the labour hire company? Or, is the modern employee supposed to be a contractor and as such is solely responsible for his or her own welfare?

The employment conundrum might be the subject for today since the news this morning of yet another workplace accident and the passing of the 'duty of care' buck.

Lewis? Where was he, I wondered.

Lewis had recently become, if not addicted to, but certainly more than just a regular user of a mobile phone for his news. He was more electronically progressive than I, and I rarely consulted my phone, preferring the traditional. The Sydney Morning Herald and the ABC. But

even they had shrunk. The Herald, now condensed from broadsheet to tabloid and the ABC from real and investigative journalism to almost being a clone of commercial channels with its constant re-positioning and retiring (I think that's what they called it), of what I believed were good journalists, and its withdrawing of what I thought was good programming. Even the morning news programme had descended into the inane chat format, but so-far still thankfully sprinkled with *some* relevance and truth. And thankfully, so far the new management of the ABC had allowed 'Media Watch', and 'Insiders' to continue mostly unpolluted. Or so was my perception. Others may, and will, no-doubt, disagree. I know Lewis does.

But what was happening to the trusted journalists? Well....may you ask? I think they were all moving down the south coast writing up their memoirs. Or some took to fiction and others to the political biographical genre. Some even became ghost writers for celebrities and sports people who could not string two words together but sell books by the million.

I could mostly predict what Lewis would say on any given issue, we had been discussing matters topical for decades. But sometimes Lewis would astound me with a response that was unexpected. And I too, possibly astounded him for the same reason. He did, on the odd occasion agree with me, and on other odd occasions, I with him. We mostly had respect for each-others' opinions, regardless of whether we agreed or not.

Most of the time we agreed to disagree.

And that is the beauty of democracy. Yes, I know it has its faults. I think it was Churchill who said, and I may be paraphrasing, when I also say, 'democracy is the worst form of government – apart from all the rest'. Or was it that Churchill too, was quoting? But regardless, I agree.

Democracy allows us, expects us even, to be different.

But also, in this current era of democracy, the concepts of patriotism and nationalism have become blurred. We are all under the influence of the opinion of those with access to a method of infecting us with opinions that confuse

patriotism and nationalism. But most of us don't realise it, and less still, recognise that the genesis of nationalism was mostly intentional and fuelled by those with interests in the money or power it created.

I told Lewis, "it is a very fine line between the two", he agreed. This was one of those odd occasions.

Did we love each other, Lewis and I, or loath each-other? Yes, both. And love was an unspoken thing; it was unspoken in the context of the words 'brother', or 'mate'. But never 'love'. Blokes who talk of loving each other must be poofers – mustn't they? No we *weren't* poofers. Nothing like that, so for us to use the word love in public, even in the brotherly sense, was a brotherly faux-pas. And I don't remember my father ever telling me that he loved me. So, to us, brotherly love was mateship.

Leave other interpretations of love for the priests and scoutmasters and school teachers, yes, more fodder for debate. There had been local stories. Lewis and I had heard them, and believed some of them. There had been a Royal

Commission that had looked under rocks and found many unholy spiders. The unholy cardinals, and scoutmasters, and teachers, and coaches. Some of whom Lewis and I, and others of our cohort knew. Some of our cohort had given hurting evidence.

And we heard that the headmistress of an ultra-orthodox Jewish girls' school had been outed by her victims for molesting the little girls. And that really shocked both Lewis and I. But when I thought about it, why would sexual predation of children be the exclusive domain of men? And it then appeared it wasn't, it was just a lot less common, or maybe a lot less reported.

But didn't I love my father? Yes I did. I just didn't have the words.

And then there is, Alby, our barman, who neither loved, nor agreed, with anyone. And Alby had heard it all many times before. There was not an argument that at some time in the last forty-odd-years of his career as the custodian of these one thousand-odd square feet of Australia, in which I was now sitting, that he hadn't had to adjudicate on.

And Alby, if the discussion was on sport or cricket, would slap the well worn journal appropriate to the subject on the bar before, or between, the opposing protagonists. And if the subject was on religion, he could also produce a Gideon's Bible with most of its pages still intact. And for a self declared atheist, he knew as much of the Bible as Father Riley or the Salvation Army collectors who would appear in the bar, here, like clockwork at five o'clock every Friday afternoon. They rattled their collection boxes and threatened us with the appearance of the *whole* brass band at Christmas. And as they rattled their boxes every Friday they were accompanied by their brothers, and sometimes sisters, of the brass quartet of old and young players, and their three hymn repertoire: sometimes nearly in tune.

Alby reckoned if every trumpet in the world was melted down and made into a cymbal, it would be useful. He said, there was only one thing worse than that brass band, and that was the bagpipes of the Presbyterians. And Alby had once claimed, 'the definition of a gentleman was a bloke that owned a set of bagpipes and *never* played them.'

Our daily meeting place, as is the Australian way, is *our* pub (regular drinkers tend to be territorial), this place where I now await the appearance of Lewis. The Commercial Hotel. Our pub had somehow – so far, dodged the bullet of ‘gentrification’ and was, as it had been, for nine decades – and, as it was, so it shall be. It, our pub, The Commercial, was a stubborn cream tiled (with green borders) suburban establishment and had become that from the once rural atmosphere it was surrounded by at the time of its rise from the paddock. The land it stood on was once the front paddock of a dairy farm that had long since been subdivided. Gentrified with streets and cars and lampposts and shops and.....well, suburbanised.

But Lewis was late, so I continued to – as they say - ponder my navel.

And I pondered that Lewis and I, were reluctantly suburban. We had evolved in this place along with the early stages of the socially cancerous suburbanisation. We just grew, or more likely were simply absorbed, with this now sprawling conglomeration of cultures, of ethnicities, of colours, which seemed to

surreptitiously surround us, I woke one morning and it was seemingly suddenly there – this conglomeration, we didn't notice it as it arrived, very stealthily in dribs and drabs. After a while it was just there. We were in it; had become part of it.

I mean, I didn't dislike the influx of difference, and I did like the food of those differences; the kebab, the falafel, the pizza, the sweet and sour, and the food gave me another subject for debate. But I know my father, ex-serviceman that he was and proud of his ANZAC tradition, would *not* eat these foods on principal (ex-enemy food), and Alby was also not pleased with it at all, and said so in words of despair, or was it lament, for our dissolving way of life?

Lewis was mostly ambivalent. And it *was* so that that opinion was as divided on this subject of immigrants as it was on the emergence of many other things. I would have liked to have thought that I had an open mind, but adjusting one's tolerance with increasing rapidity mixed with the handicap of advancing age was proving more challenging with the passing of each week.

And my father?

Recently gone.

Dead.

He was a simple, honest man. A good man, if rather narrow minded. He was a challenged father. Yes, challenged by me, and he was stubborn, but just trying to do his best. Maybe it was me who wanted more than he could give. Or maybe it was he who couldn't be what I needed, I don't know. There were tensions. Not insurmountable, but never, in the end, surmounted. There were always conversations that needed to be had, and were never had.

And the paddocks, the fertile farmland of Lewis' family dairy farm that had been resumed when he was still a young boy. The once fertile farmland now buried under the concrete slabs of modern, well modern fifty years ago, places of employment or commerce. Places where people such as us laboured our forty hours a week making components for electric motors, or shirts, or underpants, or paintbrushes, or steel frames for buildings, just like the buildings we

once worked in. And the supermarkets and department stores that had mushroomed from the ruins of where Mrs. Fairbairn's Fruit Shop, and Mr Archer's Jewellery and Watch Repairs, Andy's Café, Mr Davidson's Shoes, and other such single trader shops, once stood. That was when business was a one person, or family endeavour, and mostly an honourable way of making a modest and honest profit. Most of them closed for an hour for lunch.

I think, today's business model is the antithesis of that.

Franchises? They say the modern profit utopia? I think not.

And Mrs Fairbairn gave us bruised fruit, and the grocery store gave us broken biscuits. And the bakery gave us misshapen bread rolls, hot out of the oven. I can still smell the fresh warmth, the earthy floury odour of the bread roll.

And now, as I sit here on my stool at the bar, waiting for Lewis, my bladder, happens more often these days, is awakening.

“Just going for a piss, Alby”. I said, as I slid from my perch and left for the porcelain altar with its crystals of incense activated by the Old Ale, filtered through my kidneys.