

'An inspirational and profoundly intimate account of one person's life journey. A journey from child abuse, through depression and self-destruction, to grace and enlightenment.'

When Angels Cry

David O'Neill

CHILD ABUSE - DEPRESSION - SELF DISCOVERY
FRIENDSHIP - CAREER - GOD - CANCER - SURFING
DRINK & DRUGS - SELF HARM - LIFE'S PURPOSE
SIGNS & WONDERS - PSYCHIATRY
REPPRESSED MEMORY - FEAR AND LOVE - TRUTH



'This is an important book, full of experiences. '

- ITA BUTTROSE

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Free Preview

PART ONE

FINDING OUT

'I listen to my words

But they fall far below.'

- CAT STEVENS

CHAPTER ONE

The Beginning of the End

Being tucked away inside the house with your family on a cold, rainy day creates a feeling of real intimacy. Your home becomes a cosy sanctuary from the unpleasantness outside. Your mind seems to slow, to settle a little. It loses the urgent edge that grips you on those warm, sunny days of summer. Rather than seizing the day while it's there you seem to accept that nothing much happens on days like these. You're quite prepared to let them slide by and see what happens tomorrow.

We were in the kitchen. My daughter Amy was sitting on her mother's lap, both of them wrapped together under a big warm dressing gown. I was standing next to them having a cup of tea. Amy had turned four about a month ago. Wendy, my wife, had just given her a cuddle and a little butterfly kiss when Amy turned to her and made a statement that was to change our lives forever.

My world that day toppled into an abyss, deep and dark, the air so thick with despair that I could hardly breathe. I had to gasp for each breath like drawing mud through a straw. It took me fifteen tormented years to scramble, scarred and broken, to the surface again. You see, I thought Dad was so pleased with his little granddaughter, so proud of his eldest son for giving him such a beautiful girl. I had been one of three boys, so Dad seemed to hold Amy dearer to his heart for her simply being a girl.

I thought he loved her. I thought he loved me.

If I'd known what lay before me - the years of heartache and hurt; the loss, grief and turmoil that consumed my whole family - I would probably have killed myself there and then. The price we paid for justice was very high, especially in terms of lost relationships

with loved ones and in the agony of watching as our family was slowly torn asunder. It left a decades-long legacy of pain, depression and loss.

I stood there in the kitchen and looked blankly into Wendy's eyes. What I'd just heard Amy tell her mother just wouldn't connect. It didn't make any sense. It was wrong; it had to be wrong.

'Mummy, Grandpa plays with my wee-wee bottom.'

Grandpa what? No, wait a minute; did she just say what I thought she'd said? She's talking about Dad for Christ's sake.

My gaze fell and I found myself studying the mottled, earthy colours in the cork tiles on the floor. I noticed, with sudden clarity, the wood-grain in the cupboard doors to my right. A strangely heightened perception, night vision to a sniper, overwhelmed me. Everything was so bright, so vivid and yet in contrast my thinking seemed clouded, dulled somehow. I looked back at Amy on her mother's lap looking at me rather sheepishly – embarrassed, I thought. My gaze continued past her, coming to rest on a tiny crack in the plaster wall. It seemed to be alive, this dark line running down the otherwise stark white of the wall, sitting there waiting patiently until I turned my back so it could creep a little closer toward the floor, open a little wider to greedily swallow the light around it.

A crack I hadn't noticed had appeared in the wall.

A crack I hadn't noticed had appeared in my life.

'Don't think about what you've just heard,' I tried to tell myself. 'Think about any other stupid thing that comes into your head, the cupboard doors and the floor tiles, but don't think about those words.' Deadly words. Words that trailed behind them a sinister expectation of coming dread, a vicious serpent stealing through the grass unknown, unseen and intent on menace.

A door creaked open a touch while I stood there with my wife and daughter on that

cold, wintry Melbourne afternoon, a door in my mind that had been closed for many years and behind it was a darkness so intense that it almost seemed to have an evil life of its own. I had no way of knowing at the time, but over the coming years that door would force its way open to reveal all the terrible secrets it had hidden from me for so long. Beyond that door though, was a second door, on the other side of which was the most overwhelming, life-enriching light I had ever known. The lesson was that I had to walk through the dark to get to it.

CHAPTER TWO

Talking to Amy

So there we were all gathered together in the kitchen of our little weatherboard home in Brighton, Victoria. Two years ago we'd moved down from the Sunshine Coast. This was before the coast had begun to transform itself into a Gold Coast look-alike. Before the up-market street cafes had appropriated the sand dunes, tables filled with high-rise yuppies, car parks overflowing with black and silver 4WDs, its beaches filled with people who still had their city clothes on, their bellies full of three-course lunches and chardonnay.

I'd accepted a job transfer to Victoria as a move into my first management role. I remember the day I arrived in Melbourne with my young family. Amy was two. We'd become hopelessly lost driving through the city and ended up at St. Kilda beach instead of Brighton beach. It was depressing - grey, cold and drizzling with rain. St. Kilda looked dirty and ugly and its beaches were a sad comedown from those beautiful, sandy stretches we'd left behind. We were hungry and tired, so we sat and ate our lunch and watched the misfits, the street girls and the homeless all shuffle past us in the rain. Wendy began to cry. I gave her a cuddle and tried to assure her we'd be okay down here but, looking around, I wasn't entirely sure we would. Melbourne felt alien and strange, cold and uninviting.

I'd flown down here on my own some weeks before to find somewhere to live and having come from the coast I headed instinctively for the nearest water, which was Port Phillip Bay. Brighton had immediate appeal and although I hadn't found an actual house, I'd decided that this was where we were going to live (with no idea that it was one of the

most expensive suburbs in Melbourne). When we finally set about looking for a home all we could afford was a small weatherboard place. Although it did have a certain charm; it was neat and tidy, close to work, close to the beach and most importantly, affordable. In the end it turned out well as there was a private hospital in the same street and Wendy is a registered nurse.

It was the middle of our second winter in Melbourne and it was freezing. We were all rugged up against the cold, mid-morning, and I was still leaning on the kitchen bench warming myself with a cup of tea. Amy was still snuggled into Wendy's lap.

After what seemed the longest time, we began to talk to her.

'Sweetheart, Mummy and Daddy want you to know that even though Grandpa is part of our family and looks after you a lot, the things you've told us he did are very bad things. Nobody, ever, is allowed to do touching like that to you, not even Daddy - nobody, ever.'

God, what has he done to her, my little girl, what has he done?

'You've been a very good girl, a very brave girl coming to Mummy and telling her what happened. We're both very proud of you for that.'

Is this okay, are we saying the right things?

'If ever anyone does anything like that to you again, no matter what they say or how scared you might be, we want you to always come and tell us. We love you and we'll always look after you.'

The truth in those words stabs at my heart like a dagger. God, I do love her so. Amy sits, bewildered I think, looking as though she wants to cry but won't let the tears come - brave little girl. We drop it. Nothing more is said. She will be the one to broach the subject again some days later.

That little talk occurred so many years ago. I still reflect on it and wonder if I'd treat that moment any differently today. I don't think so. Police, counsellors and many other

professionals told us at the time that Amy would never forget what had happened to her and that one day it would resurface to haunt her again and it has, but she chose her time of disclosure many years later when she felt safe enough and confident enough to do so.

A couple of days after that first talk in the kitchen Amy was in the bath while I sat on the edge of the tub listening to her chatter about kindergarten and fuzz-buckets (her imaginary friends) and crayons and hair clips – all those things so important to a little girl just turned four - when she suddenly sat up and exclaimed: ‘Daddy, maybe what Grandpa did wasn't really wrong. You know, what he did with me, ‘cause it sort of tickled.’

‘What tickled, sweetheart?’ I replied.

‘Well, you know, when he put his hand in.’ She was sitting spread-legged in the bath with her hand down between her legs.

‘What do you mean put his hand in? Grandpa's hand won't fit there,’ I ventured clumsily.

‘No, not his whole hand you silly duffer, just part of his hand.’ Now she was demonstrating by holding one finger up in the air. I sat on the side of the bathtub clutching a dripping washcloth like a refugee in some war-torn country grief-bent over the lifeless body of their child. But this wasn't a war zone; it was Melbourne - Australia. It was me. It was my daughter. She couldn't possibly be holding her finger in the air like that. She can't possibly have said what I just heard her say. Here was a beautifully naked four-year-old girl sitting in a bathtub, all pretty curls and rosy cheeks, the picture of childhood innocence, talking about her grandfather fingering her vagina. My God, what do you do with that?

A strange fog charged with dark blue lightning filled my head, filled the room. Sorrow draped her arms around my shoulders from behind. Heavy - so heavy I had to lean against the edge of the bath to take her weight. She stayed with me for a very long time.

I still wonder whether we did the right thing. We were advised to seek immediate counselling for Amy. We didn't and we don't know whether that was a mistake or not. We just felt that any long-term counselling ran the risk of cementing her memory of the events and permitting her, perhaps even training her, to dwell on them. Christ, she was only four. Wasn't that a bit much to ask? She knew we loved her, she knew we believed her and she knew we would keep her safe. What better start to coping with anything in this life than to simply know that someone truly loves you, trusts you and keeps you from harm? We'd be there for her when she wanted to talk. She knew that too.

Looking back, we can see that there were a number of signs that something was wrong. The local kindergarten had recently brought a doctor in to check the children's health and Wendy had mentioned to her that Amy had developed a nasty rash across her chin, just beneath her bottom lip. She'd asked the doctor what she thought might be causing it (this was a few weeks before Amy had told us about Dad). Amy was also going to the toilet far too frequently, sometimes a dozen times through the night and not doing anything when she got there. The doctor noted this, looked at her rash and asked whether something might have happened to upset her, perhaps a close relative had died or a friend had moved away. She thought that Amy might be biting down over her bottom lip with her front teeth, causing the rash - a sign that something was probably disturbing her. She also suggested that we have the toilet problems investigated, as perhaps there was some irritation there. Having later questioned Amy about what might be bothering her and satisfying ourselves that nothing was wrong, we dismissed it all as something that would pass. Again in hindsight we can see that Dad too was acting strangely in a few subtle ways.

Because of Wendy's shift-work at the hospital and me being away regularly on business, Mum and Dad were often called upon to look after Amy. For some reason Dad had recently taken to making unkind remarks about her. We'd go over to their place to

pick her up and he'd invariably make some critical comment about her behaviour: 'You should watch that little girl, she's getting too big for her boots' or 'you should stop spoiling her, she's becoming a proper little brat' or 'that girl tells the most ridiculous stories'. The comments surprised us for two reasons, the first being that both Mum and Dad had always spoiled her far more than we ever had and secondly, Amy had always been a placid child and had never displayed any rudeness or cheek, especially to her grandparents. If only we'd known, if only there had been a way for us to know. Although we still consider ourselves fortunate to have found out as early we did. Probably the only reason Amy had come to us in the first place was that she knew Grandpa had gone home to Queensland and couldn't hurt her if she told. Secrecy is the child molester's most powerful weapon. We hadn't understood that. Now we know how to wrest that power from them. All you have to do is tell someone the secret.

CHAPTER THREE

Closed Doors

And so another tomorrow came, as unwelcome as a thunderstorm at a graveside funeral, as annoyingly insistent as a hungry baby's cry. I was outside, the cold wind in my face a rude shock. I'd spent the last two days locked away inside the house, the rest of the world outside. Now I was out there again too. I felt exposed, naked and vulnerable. Can anyone see what's happened, does it show somehow? Jesus, I feel like it's written all over my face. My father tried to fuck my little girl. Look, over here, my Dad's a child molester.

I felt dirty, ashamed and embarrassed, as though I'd been exposed as a member of some vile, perverted sect and found myself out in the town square with a sign hanging off me - waiting to be noticed, waiting for the first stones to strike. I wanted to sneak back into the house and stay there. I wanted to delete the last two days, erase them the way you erase errors on a piece of paper. We hadn't done anything wrong. We were good people. We loved our daughter. Why was this happening to us?

Wendy and I decided to discuss what had happened with the police and seek their opinion as to what we should do. I had no intention at that stage of pursuing any charges. Wendy, however, had wanted blood. She was angry now, the initial shock replaced by a cold, steely anger. I think I remember envying her that. I was still numb and shell-shocked and couldn't seem to put a finger on exactly how I was feeling. Was it really guilt and embarrassment or was it denial? I wasn't sure, but I know I wasn't angry like Wendy. I was sad, I was confused and I felt somehow powerless, but I wasn't angry. Should that disturb me, I wondered?

What Amy told us my father had done were explicit and detailed. We never considered that she might have made it up or mimicked something she'd heard from an older child somewhere, as we'd been told is sometimes the case. She was distressed and frightened and I can't imagine the strength it took for her to have come to us the way she did. I hadn't been able to rationalise any of the debate that Wendy and I had engaged in the night before about what we intended to do. She was focussed, in control and determined that we act while I was floating around in a sea of hurt, anxiety and uncertainty. I felt estranged, like someone who's just watched a movie and wondered why they were the only one crying. Here I was though, outside in the cold Melbourne night, walking down to the local police station - to do what, I didn't really know.

The Brighton police station was only two blocks from where we lived. I shuffled along in the evening chill trying to formulate the best way to broach the subject once there. I wandered past the primary school with its bicycle racks gleaming in the streetlight, echoes of a schoolyard over-flowing with happy, laughing children. Will my little girl be happy, will she be okay, or do things like this mute a child's laughter forever?

I continued over the railway bridge where we always stopped and waited for a train to come roaring through, Amy clinging to my legs until it was gone. It always seemed to scare her a little but she still made me stop and wait for a train each time. She has other fears to overcome now. I trudged through the dense layer of maple leaves carpeting the sidewalk. The trees were almost bare now, autumn having stolen the last remnants of their cloaks of red and golden-brown, leaving them empty and gnarled to face the winter, their grey-knuckled fingers leering at me from above. My God this was a wretched place with its wet, melancholy days and biting cold nights.

As the stone fascia of the police station loomed I found myself admiring the character of the historic old building. Funny, I didn't usually pay much attention to such things. It enfolded me with its ancient arms as I entered, shrouding me in a cloak of warmth after

the bitter cold outside. I started to feel a comfortable ease about being there. These people are on my side, right? They'll fix the problem now, no need for me to worry about it. I'll just leave it on their front desk and go home to bed.

The officer on duty, having heard the nature of my problem, ushered me into a quiet back room and set me down with a cup of coffee. He left for a moment, so I lit a cigarette. I wonder if you're allowed to smoke in here, too bad if you're not. I sat looking around the room. It was a nice old building from the outside but then once inside you began to appreciate that old was the operative word. The room I was in was small but it had a ceiling that seemed to go on up forever. There was a heater on the floor next to the desk working desperately to keep out the cold, but with the amount of open space from floor to ceiling it wasn't having much effect. Everything in the room seemed to be as old as the building itself, from the big black manual typewriter on the desk to the faded and peeling landscape on the wall above it. The desk itself was strewn with all manner of typed reports and official-looking documents, a vase of plastic roses standing sentinel over them. I could hear the loud mechanical tick of the huge clock behind me and in the background the static-filled chatter of the police radio in the next room. The door opened and the officer entered again.

'Okay, sorry about that,' he began. 'Now tell me exactly what happened.'

He'd swung a chair around backwards and sat leaning in toward me. Then he just let me talk. I tried to state the facts objectively, but I knew my pain was showing. My bottom lip kept trembling, betraying me, and I was on the verge of tears toward the end. The officer sat and watched me through the cigarette haze, listening intently. I knew he wasn't just listening but hearing and understanding; he seemed to be truly concerned. God, how much sorrow had this man already seen, how many tragic events had been played out right before his very eyes? How many times had he sat in that chair and considered the person sitting where I now sat and wished he could help? I left the station

late in the night, relieved but also a little frustrated by what he'd told me. Because the abuse had occurred in Victoria, my father would have to face the courts in this State if charged. He and Mum had returned to Queensland to live so the police would need to issue a warrant for his arrest and extradition back to Victoria for a trial.

Any case however, would rest almost entirely on the testimony of Amy herself. We had no physical evidence to support her story, nothing to corroborate what she'd told us. The officer had tentatively asked if there was the chance of having any tangible evidence that could show interference of a sexual nature, any signs of attempted intercourse or the use of foreign objects. Was there any presence of semen or general bruising in the genital area? The list went on, a macabre collection of bodily intrusions straight out of a Marquee de Sade novel. I began to feel as though I'd stepped over to the dark side where the trolls and monsters of my own childhood lay in wait. The brutal reality of what had happened to my daughter slowly began to dawn on me.

So having none of the material evidence it seemed we would need, Amy would have to be the major witness, and probably the only witness, in her defence. Her honesty would be determined by the integrity of her word against Dad's if it ever reached a court of law, a scared little four-year-old girl against a seasoned fifty-six-year-old businessman - not a chance. I wandered home oblivious now to the cold and climbed into bed. I drifted off to sleep knowing that at least that door had been closed on me just as surely and completely as the door of the police station had swung shut and latched into place behind me as I walked out into the night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Suicide Threats

We hadn't quite pictured them sitting on the beach sipping pinna coladas and having fun in the sun, but Mum and Dad had gone away on holiday as planned, not long after I'd left Eldon. Where they were we neither knew nor cared at first, but the closer we came to going home ourselves the more I began to wonder what they might be doing. What were they thinking, where had they gone and why hadn't they tried to call us? There'd been no further contact since my telephone conversation with Dad from the Coast. I was beginning to feel uneasy about his intentions and so I tried to find out where they were. As it turned out they'd left strict instructions with relatives to keep their whereabouts secret. I began to wonder whether they planned to disappear rather than face the threat of an investigation.

A few days later I received a call from Uncle Kevin that put an end to my speculation. Dad had been in touch with him and although he still wouldn't, or couldn't, tell me where they were, he did have a message for me - a message that chilled me and sent my heart cold. I see now that it was the beginning of a number of attempts by Dad to revert all the blame for what had happened back on to me. His arrogance throughout this ordeal had surprised and angered me. It was almost as though he truly believed he'd done nothing wrong, that I'd been out to destroy him for some twisted, selfish reason of my own. On a number of occasions since he'd done things designed specifically to hurt or scare me, or at the very least upset and worry me, which is exactly what this message was intended to do. And it did. Kevin informed us that if the police or anyone else made any contact with Dad over anything to do with the girls he would kill himself. He'd discussed

the matter with Mum and should anything eventuate they were both going to die together. Dad had decided he'd rather kill himself than go to jail again and in her grief Mum had agreed she'd rather go with him than face a life without him.

It had become quite clear that Mum's loyalties lay solely with Dad. She'd been very bitter toward us right from that first day in Eldon. It appeared that she, like Dad, had thought we were the ones who'd done the wrong thing by exposing him instead of keeping quiet about it and trying to sort it out within the family. Dad had even gone as far as to tell Kevin he intended to park the car beside the beach somewhere and put a pipe in through the window from the exhaust. My father had told him they'd both rather die than face the embarrassment and public humiliation that I'd conspired to bring upon them. It truly scared me. I was devastated. At the time I had no idea it was just the beginning of Dad's little power plays, although I'm sure Mum would have been deadly serious. My God, what if they got nervous and did it anyway - even if I didn't intend to press charges - how the hell was I going to live with that? For the next two weeks I was on a razor's edge, worried about whether they intended to go through with it or whether, as Wendy had suggested, it was simply a ploy to keep me from reporting anything to the police. I wasn't prepared to call their bluff and find out. Every night I expected to see them on the news:

Tragic double suicide on popular Whitsunday beach

A husband and wife apparently holidaying together in the idyllic Whitsunday Passage have been found dead in their vehicle at a popular seaside park early this morning. A length of hose was found inserted into the rear passenger window and police are treating it as a suicide. Police investigations are continuing.

I had no way of contacting them and Kevin insisted he didn't know exactly where they were, just up north somewhere. Even if I thought I could talk them out of it and

convince them I wouldn't go to the police, I couldn't find them to tell them. The stress, the guilt and the worry that this little stunt provoked for those few weeks are unforgivable. I look back on it now and I could kill the bastard for that alone.

How dare he. Who the fuck does he think he is? I can almost hear him thinking: 'you reckon you can take me down, well think again. I'm your father remember, I can hurt you very badly.' And the truth is that I was still quite scared of him. As a young boy I'd found out very early that he could be cruel, that he could hurt me when he wanted to and I couldn't do a thing about it. Those two weeks of anxiety would become a major factor in my gradual decline into despair and depression. I can't relate to you how harrowing it felt to be sitting helplessly waiting to hear confirmation of the deaths of both your parents; how it felt to go to bed at night wondering whether you'd be woken in the early hours of the morning by an interstate phone call, a sombre voice at the end of the line informing you that your Mum and Dad had been found dead. I had a series of dreams, or rather nightmares, about their impending suicide, one of which shook me rather badly.

I'm sitting in a small cosy room, a glowing fireplace in the corner its only light. My brother Paul is there with me, both of us cross-legged on the floor. Uncle Kevin is seated near the fire in a sprawling old lounge-chair. On either side of him lay two large black dogs, their heads resting on their paws, eyes closed. We're all quietly discussing Dad's recent suicide, trying to fathom where it all started, why it all happened.

Suddenly both dogs start to whine and become restless. Their fear escalates until they're both growling menacingly in the still of the night. Then I begin to feel it too, something sinister, something menacing in the air. I look to Paul and see that he too has become uneasy.

'Something's coming' I whisper to him.

He nods as we both slowly rise to our feet. Whatever it is, we know we can't be caught inside the house when it comes.

Moving outside, the feeling of impending danger becomes an almost tangible thing I can taste the fear in my mouth. It clings to my skin, drawing sweat.

Out in the yard the darkness is heavy and full of dread. We each grab a piece of timber from beneath the house to defend ourselves and make our way cautiously up the driveway toward the street. Whatever it is, it moves steadily closer. We can feel its presence ever nearer. Our fear builds to a terror until we're both on the verge of running for our lives. Then it's on us.

Something enormous rushes over us in the dark, something that feels and smells like a huge bird, its massive wings spread out in full flight mere centimetres above our heads. The sheer power and strength of it literally takes our breath away.

There is no sound, no rush of air, no turbulence whatsoever, just a mighty whoosh of...being - and then it's gone.

Shaken and badly frightened we retreat into the house. The dogs are lying quietly again beside Kevin, who seems to be dozing. We hurriedly wake him to tell him what's happened, babbling incoherently as we try to explain what it felt like.

'What was it, Kevin, what the fuck was it?'

'Something went wrong out there,' he began, 'something went very wrong. Instead of your father moving on after he'd died he stayed and went looking for you two. He almost had you, almost took you with him, but I was able to ward him off and send him on to where he belongs. He's gone now. He won't trouble you any more.'

That was just one in a long series of dreams that haunted me until very recently. Slowly but surely though, they began to help me open the first door, to let me peer into the darkness behind and learn to face the fears that had haunted me since childhood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Darkness Moves In

Some of the more introspective passages of this book were the most difficult to write. I'd collected a mass of notes, all scribbled hastily in the dead of night, describing my torment, but oh, the abject misery. Why the hell would anyone want to read any of it? I feared that my writing would steal my reader's will to live, that its publication would incite a flurry of suicides across the country, all of them clutching my book firmly against their sorry bosoms. How could I relate my feelings without sounding self-indulgent, without burdening you with the wretchedness of it all?

So, having determined to resume a normal life, what actually happened was that I fell into a deep depression that lasted, uninterrupted, for a full three months. I know now that it was probably the first occasion where I should have been in hospital. (By the time I'd finished writing this book I'd been in a psychiatric hospital twice. Many years later, having engaged in battle with the public mental health system through advocating for people with mental illness, I would thank my wife profusely for having the foresight to arrange private health insurance for me. I believe that most of Queensland's public mental health units are a disgrace.) Anyway, that first crippling period of relentless depression was to linger for another two years without treatment of any kind, although that three-month episode was unspeakably debilitating in its intensity. Words fail to convey the total devastation that accompanies depression of that severity. Only those who have experienced its touch first-hand can attest to its cruelty.

William Styron, author of the acclaimed novel *Sophie's Choice*, suffered such a depressive illness, which he described in his haunting book *Darkness Visible*. The

craftsmanship of his writing affords far more justice to the condition than I could attempt, so here's an extract from the book where he is reflecting on the contrast between physical pain (which we've all experienced to some degree), and its ability to be alleviated or lessened and psychic pain, which cannot:

'In depression this faith in deliverance, in ultimate restoration, is absent. The pain is unrelenting and what makes the condition intolerable is the foreknowledge that no remedy will come – not in a day, an hour, a month or a minute. So the decision-making of daily life involves not, as in normal affairs, shifting from one annoying situation to another less annoying – or from discomfort to relative comfort – but moving from pain to pain. One does not abandon, even briefly, one's bed of nails but is attached to it wherever one goes.

'In any physical illness of comparable intensity, the patient would be confined to bed, his invalidism sanctioned and unquestioned. However, the sufferer from depression has no such option and therefore finds himself, like a walking casualty of war, thrust into the most intolerable social and family situations.

'There he must, despite the anguish devouring his brain, present a face approximating the one that is associated with ordinary events and companionship. He must try to utter small talk, and be responsive to questions, and knowingly nod and frown and, God help him, even smile. But it is a fierce trial attempting to speak a few simple words.'

I look back and realise that I'd lived in that condition for almost a hundred days and a hundred nights. How I made it through without killing myself I don't know. There had not been a moment when I felt a shade of relief, not one moment where I experienced even an hour's reprieve from the unrelenting agony of the depression. This state of utter despair was made crueller for me by the anxiety attacks that often accompanied it. At my lowest ebb an intense, nauseating sense of dread would grip me. To give a rather clumsy analogy it felt as it would if I'd had a premonition that my wife and daughter had been killed in a car accident. The anxiety attack was that feeling of dread, of waiting around at home for the phone call you knew was coming to confirm it. These attacks left me

physically sick to the stomach even when I knew they had absolutely no substance.

I've learned over the years that my anxiety was always present during episodes of depression. They went hand-in-hand and often the anxiety would lift with the depression, so it was rare for me to experience anxiety in the absence of depression. I also learned that I could cling to the fact that the depressive episodes would always end, whether it took days or weeks or months, they would always end, although I didn't know that in the early days of the illness. This was to become an important lesson in the management of the illness.

I was to suffer at least three episodes of that depth of depression every year for the next ten years. Each episode could last anywhere from one to eight weeks. Depression is classified as a mental illness but I can tell you there are many physical symptoms as well. When I became this fiercely depressed I would also become chronically tired. Apparently most sufferers experience insomnia, but I was the opposite, I just could not get enough sleep. My body would become so tired that even washing myself in the shower was an extreme effort. My arms would ache for hours afterwards and so I would reduce myself to showering as infrequently as possible. Walking eighteen holes of golf was a torture I soon abandoned and mowing the lawn would see me in bed for the rest of the day. My eyesight would deteriorate markedly as well. During one bout of depression I actually went to an optometrist who prescribed glasses for me. When I returned around three months later for a follow-up, after the depression had lifted, she was surprised at how much my eyesight had improved.

Whenever I was depressed I would feel vaguely physically ill without being able to identify quite what the symptoms were. All I could tell my psychiatrist was that it felt as though my entire insides were about to turn to soup and that I was going to liquefy into this gooey puddle on the floor at any minute. My sex life became non-existent as my libido deserted me and, as William Styron stated, to even speak was sometimes an effort

quite beyond me.

So here I was living back in Brisbane trying to find work, trying to get on with my life and yet the truth was that I couldn't even bring myself to get out of bed to take a piss and I mean that quite literally. There was many a time I came within a whisker of peeing in bed rather than attempt the extraordinary effort required to go to the toilet. How was I supposed to approach prospective employers when I felt like that? The fact is that I didn't really care. Nothing mattered any more. I didn't want a job, I didn't want to get on with my life, I just wanted to find a quiet little corner somewhere and die.

I wrote a lot during this period: black thoughts, dark imagery and sorry, lost ramblings. I used a pen the same way I'd used a razor blade across my wrists, slashing hard and fast then lying back in total resignation to watch my own blood seep into the paper in front of me. I'd find myself alone at the computer in the early hours of the morning desperately pouring my heart out onto the pages, ridding myself of another day of anguish before it tore me apart. I eventually decided that perhaps the best way to get through this part of my journey was to invite you in to see what I'd written. You could stand at my shoulder for the next few pages as I showed you the thoughts that filled my head for those few months. A lot of it was confused and often a little irrational, but I've left it all as it was written in order to give you an accurate portrayal of my state of mind at the time.

I know that some of you will find it all quite self-absorbed, probably even boring, but that's okay, I didn't include it for the likes of you. I wrote most of it in a place that I know has been visited by many before me and will continue to be by many more to come. I've included it for you. You know the place of which I speak and you will know the feelings of which I write.

Grief takes you by the hand and leads you there. She takes you along a pathway meandering through the wilderness, leading on to who knows where except that you

know you're moving further away from everything that is familiar to you, everything that is dear to you. She holds you and comforts you. She makes you feel it's okay to be with her even though you're in such alien surroundings, even though you know it's going to be nearly impossible to find your way back.

So come through to where she has led me, come with me into my room of darkened mirrors. You will be the only other one there. It's probably around 2:30 in the morning as we sit alone; the only sound in the whole world is the muted chatter of the keyboard and the soft rhythmic whisper of my own heartbeat. After another day of nothingness it feels so good to be back in here. You don't have to pretend anymore, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do. There's a big mug of warm coffee standing on the desk and the room is already shrouded in cigarette haze. It swirls into the air above you bringing with it a quiet sense of being at peace for a time. Grief sits quietly at your side, reassuring you with her presence. I open a door in my mind, a door that leads to the very innermost chambers of my tortured soul and I begin to write...

The air so thick I can't move through it. Words, like so many floating soap bubbles, vanish before they reach anyone's ears. Vision blurs, my stomach wretched, a grey-green poison. Acid. Dissolving. Taste it in my speech. My head moans. My chest swells with pain, a constrictor around my heart. My body a half-cured sculpture in plaster-of-Paris, off-white, pallid, cold and clammy to the touch. Turn my face to find relief. Close my eyes. Open them. Squint them. Rub them until the starbursts come. Relief though, will not. She has deserted me. There is nothing beyond this room. There is nothing within this room. There is nothing

Later in the night I have a pen and paper beside my bed, as has become my custom, ready for another exorcism.

I lie in bed and feel the night; soft and warm against my skin like the reassuring caress of a mother on her newborn's cheek. I'm here again. I'm here with you. Rest awhile for today is done. The darkness is complete but for tiny dancing neon against closed lids. Somewhere above the fan flutters giving the air a

heavy pulse in quiet rhythm with my own. I feel my heart sustaining me. If it were so that I could just switch my life to OFF, I'd do it now. I'd leave a tear glistening for the morning sun to catch and melt away, like all my dreams that never were. I'd clench a fist, knuckles white around the anger that I've held, so that when in death it fell slowly open the pain within could fall away and let me lie in peace. A quiet sigh could breathe from me the sadness that I've kept. No sobs or cries of anguish here just leave me now to sleep. I want to move on to another place where tomorrows never come and yesterday was just a dream that never really was.

I became suicidal many times. It wasn't so much a desperate, angry urge to end my life but rather a brooding, melancholy resignation to the belief that my life could never be the same again; that I had sunk to the depths of despair, never to see daylight again. I was a prisoner to the cold hard truth of knowing that tomorrow would begin and end with the same heavy weight of unbearable sorrow that had been yesterday and the day before that.

ANOTHER EPISODE

I am sick again. I have grown so weary of carrying my dignity in the face of this illness. Yet all the while I fight the cancer, the malignant growth of anger that multiplies with every careless word, every thoughtless, selfish deed.

Where once there was passion there is now nothing worth a mere embrace. Where once there was warmth there is now only the chill of aloofness and suspicion.

Energy and strength, once used for progress, is now expended in battle. Wounds, not yet scars, still bleed as I carry myself into the next conflict, the next ambush. Then after each war, when the fight is won, I try to find what it was I had fought for and find it not. There is nothing

No peace. No reward. No love. No reprieve.

There is only a cautious waiting, a restless eye on the horizon. Wanting sleep yet ever on edge, maintaining a position hardly worthy of the defence, afraid to hope, afraid to dream when all is spent on mere survival. My field of vision reduced to that narrow tract before me from whence I know the next

attack will come.

I would write all the thoughts I knew I couldn't share with anyone else. I'd often write to other people, never intending to send, never intending to show them what I had written.

SHADOWS FADE

I am as a ghost - I see you as through a veil. I hear you as through driving rain. Wherever I am, whatever I do, I remain locked inside this dead zone. I am here, but I am not with you.

I am as a shadow - You see that I am here because you can determine my form, my presence. You stand before me and acknowledge me, but you cannot touch me. You cannot embrace me - nor I you.

I speak to you - of things of the heart and you talk over me with things of your world, houses and cars, holidays and restaurants, of who's making how much money. I care nothing for these things. I want my soul back. Do you know what it is to live with demons? Do you know what it is for the spirit to cry in torment?

I whisper to you - in quiet desperation, please help me and you reply with okay then, see you at lunch. And it causes me to wonder was I not eloquent enough with my language, is language a sufficient vehicle for these thoughts? Why have I become such an enigma to you?

I am as a shadow - and while the demons reside the world drifts further from my reach. Is it you who appears ghost-like now?

I fade - just as the shadow fades toward the setting of the sun. And I wonder whether a subtle madness lies just beyond the point where darkness falls and shadows disappear.

Throughout this period of total despair though, there was something in the dark to which I clung. It took me many years to understand just what it was. At the time I questioned it as you would a spectre suddenly appeared before you. Could it have been my love for my wife and daughter or a fierce determination to not give in, some small portion of my heart refusing to let go of life? Whatever it was it sustained me and helped me to keep my eyes on the light, however dim it might sometimes have become.

VISITED BY ANGELS

A breeze caressed the grass and blew across my dreams. A lovely breeze, soft and warm. It filled me with a peace so still that I wept in my sleep for the beauty of it. I listened to the night and heard my own heartbeat. I sensed others there for me. Waiting. Waiting for what?

I lay in me, with me. I felt the whole universe turn above me yet couldn't feel the sheets in which I lay. I close my eyes to find them already closed. What then do they see? It all seems light, so happy, and light. I pray I should never wake unless I can somehow bring this place with me.

There's so much here to know. If only I can sleep long enough to grasp it. There's something here for me in this abstract world of riddles and curious puzzles, of images so dear yet so perplexing. I get so close sometimes and then they're gone with the morning. So I carry a sorrow through the day because I almost touched it, almost had it.

It feels like such a beautiful thing but its beauty fades so fast. Try as I might I cannot recall the visions. I lie in this place, still as a stone, allowing myself to melt into the quiet so I can hear the voices.

They seem so distant, though. Whispers from afar. Why don't they come to me? They all seem to be so happy for me yet they hesitate to guide. Please don't leave me to find my own way. I don't stand a chance. Please come to me before I fall.

Could there be such a thing as guardian angels, had there been someone watching over me through all of this, or do you invent such needful things in your mind to counter the loneliness? Later, having learned the nature of mania, I came to believe that these thoughts were just the manifestations of mania-inspired delusions. I found that disappointing. Now however, I see the glory in them. Now I understand where such visions originate. I had experienced a tiny peek into my soul. I had indeed conversed with angels.

The most soul-destroying aspect of the illness called depression is the way it steals your self-esteem from you. I had always battled with my self-image, due in no small way to my father's influence as I grew up, but when I became depressed my feelings of worthlessness and despair were magnified a hundred-fold. I became ill at ease in the company of other people and avoided situations where I knew I'd have to put on a brave face and appear normal. It was just too hard, sometimes impossible.

I recall attending a party one night when all our friends were there. I'd been in quiet

conversation with one of them when I began to notice that a few other people had moved in closer to listen to what I was saying. It unnerved me to the point where I began to wish I'd never started talking, but I would have looked foolish if I'd simply stopped and walked away, so I felt compelled to continue. The eyes on me became as piercing searchlights. My knees went to jelly and I had a terrible urge to turn and run, to get away from this unwanted attention. What was wrong with me, why was I feeling so desperately insecure? How could I live the rest of my life with this wretched self-consciousness clinging to me, suffocating me and seeming to draw the very breath of life itself from me? As with most other aspects of what was happening to me, I had no concept of anxiety disorders or panic attacks. Someone who read one of my early drafts commented that my writing, from a psychological viewpoint, was naive. The dickhead was working through his Psychology degree at the time (don't they know it all) but he was right, because when it came to issues of the mind I was clueless.

I had become afraid to let people see me. I'd hide away inside the house for days, even weeks, wondering whether it might be best if I just ended it all here and now. This was no way to live. The anguish and guilt I'd suffered became too much for me to bear but I couldn't allow anyone to see how ill I was, because I didn't feel that I could explain why. Why was I the way I was and who could possibly understand? Sometimes I thought that if I'd had the capacity to burst out crying in front of everyone they might take notice and begin to see how much I was hurting. Mental illness is often like that. It's a seriously debilitating illness, a disability, but you can't really see it. It isn't like having a leg missing; it isn't like sitting in a wheelchair with dribble on your chin or withering away with cancer. Because people can't see it or touch it, they can't relate to it. It's just a mood and you can change your mood, can't you? Honestly, in deference to those who do live with missing limbs, at least there's some tangible evidence that something's wrong. Still, if someone had told me that losing an arm would cure the

illness I would have gnawed it off myself.

As I've mentioned, my father had so much to do with my self-perception. Even well into middle age I continued to struggle with who I was. My relationship with my father is a difficult one to describe. In my formative years he'd always seemed to be tough but fair. My brothers and I had been most afraid to invoke his wrath, just as any young kids would have been, but then something went wrong, something in him changed. To say that I was aware of the change at the time would be lying. It's only now, having been forced to re-evaluate his qualities as a father that I see what happened and can understand why. He began to act like a big grown-up bully. He teased and taunted and intimidated. He went out of his way to ensure that I never felt good about anything I did, unless of course it was something he wanted. There are so many examples of the calculated, premeditated ways he'd used to destroy my self-esteem. It seemed that at times he'd gone to extraordinary lengths to push his point home.

I was taken to an interview with the manager of a local vehicle dealership, a friend of Dad's from the church. I was young and had been unemployed for a time (mostly surfing and smoking dope), so Dad had arranged the interview in the hope that this fellow would find me fit to employ. I went in and talked to him for some forty or fifty minutes, then waited outside while Dad had a chat with him before we left. As we climbed into the car to drive home Dad went very quiet and didn't even ask how I'd felt the interview had gone. If he had I would have responded that it seemed we had gotten along quite well and that this fellow would be happy to employ me if a position were to become available. Instead Dad began to shake his head slowly, talking more to himself than to me.

'I just can't believe Norm would say things like that about you, son. I can't believe he would,' he started.

'What's wrong, Dad? What did he say?'

'I don't believe this,' he continued, still shaking his head.

'Look, son. There's no easy way to tell you this, but Norm said there's absolutely no way he'd ever employ someone like you, no way. When I asked him why I just couldn't believe some of the things he said.'

'What, what did he say?' I was sick to my stomach. I thought it had gone well.

'It's best you don't know, son. He just didn't think much of you at all. He apologised to me, seeing as how he's a friend of mine and you're my son and everything. But David, he just didn't think you'd amount to anything. He didn't think you had it in you.'

I was devastated. What was wrong with me? I thought I'd handled myself very well. Was my best just not good enough; was I really that bad?

I look back now at events such as that - and there were many of them, too many to count - and I wonder why he went to so much trouble. He must surely have gained some sort of perverse pleasure from it to go to such lengths.

My father, to me at least, always seemed to be a very large, powerful man when in fact he was a little on the short side and not at all well built. It was more the power he exuded, the way he carried himself, seemingly born of an immense confidence in his own abilities. He seemed to be an authority on everything and was never backward in coming forward with his opinion on any subject you cared to name. He was a distinguished-looking man in a casual sort of way, if that makes sense. He was the type of person who immediately struck you as being a professional business executive. His youthful features, crowned by a slightly receding crop of silver-grey hair, enhanced the impression. He looked like a man who knew who he was and where he was going. As a father he was a man we did not like to cross. His discipline was swift and merciless and we felt the wrath of both his tongue and his belt many times. In his later years he took to wearing a lot of bright floral shirts and pastel tones, as many middle-aged men are wont to do, although they never seemed to suit him as much as the more conservative

blues and greys we'd been accustomed to. The newer hues made him look as though he spent his days ambushing tyre-kickers in used car yards, which he didn't.

He always sought to be the centre of attention, whether in a business meeting or at the Sunday school picnic. He was the loudest and most conspicuous at any gathering, almost like a silly puppy let off its leash and barking madly at whomever would listen – a trait that embarrassed me no end as I grew older. Although he must have had the qualities of a leader to go with it, because that's precisely what he was. Whether it was in the church or the business arena, people seemed to hand him the mantle of leadership without a second thought. They warmed to him very quickly despite what I considered to be a tendency to show off like a stupid little school kid most of the time. It seems they took it as more a youthful exuberance, a sort of childish sense of fun that they probably found refreshing.

But he harboured a dark and sinister secret, a secret that came with terrible feelings of guilt which wormed their way into his being and slowly began to eat away at his heart, leaving virtually nothing but the cold hard shell he displayed to his children. So rather than be consumed himself by these foul hungry worms, he began to let them feed on us. He brought them out at home when no one else was around and played games with us. Cruel games. Games that were meant to hurt and make us feel poorly about ourselves, because there was no way he was going to take all this guilt upon his own shoulders. Oh no, he hadn't done anything wrong. But he was feeling so very ashamed - someone had to pay.

PART TWO
THE SHINING

'Come on, come on, come on

Get through it.

Come on, come on, come on

Love's the greatest thing

That we have.

I'm waiting for that feeling

To come.'

- BLUR

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Gift of Depression

‘So go ahead now. Ask me anything. Anything. I will contrive to bring you the answer. The whole universe will I use to do this. So be on the lookout. This book is far from my only tool. You may ask a question, then put this book down, but watch. Listen. The words to the next song you hear. The information in the next article you read. The storyline of the next movie you watch. The chance utterance of the next person you meet, or the whisper of the next river, the next ocean, the next breeze that caresses your ear – all these devices are mine; all these avenues are open to me. I will speak to you if you will listen. I will come to you if you will invite me. I will show you then that I have always been there. All ways.’

-Excerpt from Conversations With God

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If I were religious I wouldn't have hesitated in labelling the following events as miracles. I'm not though, and so I did hesitate, although I can find no other word to use, so we're stuck with it. I'm afraid that words like miracle and faith have negative religious connotations for me, because the church has used them both to portray things that have nothing to do with either. Most of what I relate to you here occurred over a period of around three months. Imagine, forty years of trouble and turmoil and then three months of back-to-back miracles. Please don't think that I am in any way special as you read of these happenings. I was, until quite recently, one of the most fucked-up human beings you could ever have the misfortune to meet.

My only experience with meditation had been during an Alpha Dynamics course that I'll tell you about shortly. I've never actually sat myself down to practice the art or attempt to find any solutions by employing its method. However, for some time now I have been keenly following my own intuition, my soul if you like, my God. I have effectively been acting on impulse, steered only by what I felt was my heart's truest motivations. If I was driving along the road and for no apparent reason felt the urge to turn left then I would turn left. For over forty years I'd been driving straight on simply because I knew what was ahead. But recently I'd decided to take the left turn for the very opposite reason. I didn't know what was ahead. And guess what's more exciting, guess how much more of the countryside you get to see? All new territory, my friend - not the same old stuff you already know about.

I've also discovered that a state of deep meditation is not altogether different from a state of deep depression. As I've mentioned previously they both allow you access to an inner searching that you'd otherwise be ignorant to. Depression forces you to internalise more so than anything you could possibly imagine. It makes you become self-critical, self-analytical, self-questioning and totally self-absorbed. And do you know what? None of these things are bad for you. They are all positive. I know it feels like hell, but don't you have to experience hell to fully appreciate heaven?

Some people are fortunate enough to go through life without ever having to suffer the mind-numbing effects of chronic depression. Others, like me, will experience it for as long as they (we) continue to deny whatever issues need to be resolved or at least understood. The depression will stubbornly remain, or continue to recur, until such time as they (we) acknowledge and confront these issues. Then the depression will begin to disappear and I promise you, it will disappear.

So why did I become depressed? I believe it's because my soul determined that it finally needed some answers and that the only way it was going to get those answers was

to force me to look for them. It brought me down into myself in the gut-wrenching violent way that only morbid depression could achieve. It made me look at myself so hard, for so long, that I couldn't help but find some answers. Either that or kill myself in the process, which was always a possibility, but then desperate acts call for desperate measures. That was what was required for me to learn what my soul wanted to teach me.

DEPRESSION IS JUST A GREAT BIG WHY.

Why, why, why? Isn't that what you ask yourself when you're writhing around in the grip of your depression? Don't you ask it more vehemently and more often the further you sink into it, the further from the outside world you become? It is your self, your soul, demanding that you confront whatever issue needs to be confronted in order to heal. That is what the soul is all about. Healing. Creating a better you by guiding you ever toward your true Self. If you weren't this depressed would you be searching this hard for answers, as desperately as you are? Think about it.

Nothing said to us, nothing we can
learn from others, reaches us so deep
as that which we find in ourselves.

Theodore Reik
(American Psychiatrist)

I've heard many people who claim to have suffered depression testify as to what finally brought them out of it. I'm sure you will have heard them too.

'Oh, exercise did it for me, takes your mind off the depression. Exercise often enough and the depression will go away.'

'Go to the beach. Play with the kids. Take a walk in the park.'

What a crock of shit. If I went to the beach the depression would come for a swim with me. If I played with the kids it would hang off my back like a sack of rotten potatoes. If I took a walk in the park it would walk right along with me. These people couldn't possibly be talking about the same traumatic life-destroying depression I had lived.

But if you do go to the beach, sit down and watch those tiny waves that ripple onto the sand right at the waterline. Marvel at how they often replicate the larger waves out in the surf. If you take a walk in the park take a moment to look at a tree and wonder at how it came to be there. Wonder how the seed from which it grew came to be there and the nourishment in the soil, the rain from the sky. Wonder at why it has taken the shape it has and why it is that the tree is actually pleasant to look at. Little things like this will begin to open your mind to the bigger things behind them and in turn the bigger things behind that. They will begin to show you the wonder in yourself. This then will be the beginning of the end for what we call depression. Don't believe it? Try it. It certainly isn't going to do you any harm, is it?