

out of
time

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Steve Hawke



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Always thinking of you Mum.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

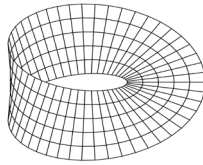
I like to think of this book as, amongst other things, a novelisation of a conceptual dilemma. I am far more concerned with the emotional realities of the characters than the medical detail. Do not expect in these pages an account that is necessarily true to the clinical courses of dementia, or the medical approaches to its treatment, many and varied as both of these things are.

And it should be blindingly obvious, but I will say the same of any references to architecture. The author will take no responsibility for any buildings that may fall down.

On the subject of falling down. Western Australian readers in particular may be familiar with the Moreton Bay fig tree at the University of Western Australia that appears in this story. The grand old dame is rather less magnificent than described here, after suffering a major collapse of some of its main branches during 2018.

Nothing lasts forever!

It is always easy to be logical.
It is almost impossible to be logical to the bitter end.
– Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*



March 2004

LOST CAR

The oversized folio of drawings is a danger to other pedestrians as Joe bustles along the pavements. He glances at his watch, breaks into an awkward jog with his torso twisted sideways to keep a grip on his precious cargo. 'Bloody Subiaco,' he mutters. He'd forgotten what a nightmare the parking is. For a while there as he circled the backstreets with increasing desperation, he'd thought he was going to be late. Another glance at the watch. He'll just make it.

A gasp of relief as he rushes into the lobby. Half a minute with hands on knees, folio leant against the wall, as he recovers his breath. Joe rarely runs these days. He pats his pockets. Nothing. He has to finger-comb and pat down his hair. Quick look at the armpits; no sweat patches showing thank god. Retuck the shirt, regather the folio, press the elevator button for the top floor. Another watch check. 'Made it. Just.'

He shakes his head at his stupidity. So much for the leisurely mental recap of his presentation that he'd planned on before going up. All he has time for is a run-through of the opening lines, yet again. It is a long time since Joe has been this nervous about a work meeting.



'No more questions?' Johnson asks. The room is silent. 'Thanks Joe. Very impressive. The team'll have to go through it with their toothcombs over the next couple of weeks, and do the

initial estimates, but subject to the due diligence, I'm prepared to say here and now that I reckon this is a design and a project that JKH Architecture will be proud to hang its hat on. I just wish I'd had the foresight to schedule this session for a couple of hours later so we could adjourn to Friday happy hour.'

Joe has trouble keeping his grin under control, as the room slowly empties with a stream of compliments and handshakes. Tony, the intern fresh out of uni who is responsible for servicing the project team, hovers with the air of an acolyte, eagerly plying him with questions about the technicalities of the semi-arch while he packs the folio away.

Joe steps out of the elevator on the ground floor debating with himself whether or not to head to the pub over the road for a celebratory schooner. He feels virtuous at his decision to head straight home. He is looking forward to ringing Anne for the debrief. Once he makes it out of the lobby into the relatively fresh air of Hay Street he can't help punching the air and letting out a whoop as he reaches for his car keys.

Where was it that I parked?

He can remember the rising panic as he'd circled the side streets and lanes looking for somewhere. The surge of relief at finally finding and grabbing an empty spot. No time to fiddle with coins at the ticket machine. Deciding to just pay the fine if an inspector comes.

But where the hell was it?

He can't bring any sort of mental image back of where ... he parked ... the fucken car.

Jesus.

Nothing. It won't come.

He starts to prowl the streets working outwards in an ever-broadening grid.

There's that red Camry that zipped into a spot before me, prick. Plenty of spare spaces now late on a Friday arvo. Where'd I go after that?

It just won't come. He checks the time, realises he's been

looking for an hour now. The JKH crew will be heading for happy hour.

Don't go past their building. Don't go past the pub. If they see me like this what'll they say?

Where the?! Somebody must have nicked it!

Panic has set in. The red Camry is still there. He's already checked this street.

Turns a corner. Police. White on blue illuminated sign. Goes in. Empty. No one at the counter. Calls. Hears the frantic tone in his own voice. Door opening. Footsteps in a corridor.

It's Constable Green from last Sunday!

Both do a double take.

Joe stammers out a complaint of a stolen vehicle, with Green studiously yet dubiously noting details of make, model and registration, until the point when the constable asks, 'And where was your vehicle parked, Mr Warton?'

BURRUP BIRDS

The sea eagle glides out of sight beyond the ridge line. Anne lowers her binoculars, notes the date and details in her field book, then relaxes against the boulder at her back to absorb the vista. Just down to her left a single bright-red desert pea catches her eye. There are random clumps of pale, wiry spinifex amongst the jumble of angular, deep-brown rocks tumbling down to a narrow, white beach. A thin fringe of mangroves curves out toward a small headland. The sea is a vibrant azure, glinting with sun sparkles, dotted with rocky islets. The mammoth, low-slung iron-ore tankers out beyond the islands seem toy-like at this distance.

She can feel herself opening up to this country. It is not the inland Pilbara of her youth – the parched grandeur of the Ophthalmia Range, the deep gorges and hidden pools of the Hamersleys. But even amidst the gritty industry of the ore wrought from the earth, there is an ancient power in the land, with the mysterious engravings of the Burrup bearing eternal witness. The boulder she has chosen as her backrest is the canvas for her favourite, a pair of grouse-like birds in plump profile, and a clutch of eggs. She knows it's frowned upon, but she cannot resist the urge to reach up and briefly feel a connection to the pocked outline of this creature from a time beyond memory.

Joe will be doing his presentation about now.

She mentally crosses her fingers for him, then pushes the unbidden thought away; it feels out of place here, out of sync with the yearning for wildness this wide Pilbara sky engenders in her soul.

These few hours with her binoculars and field book, and the bounty of the Burrup, feel like a blissful bonus. But even at Claire's, in the Karratha suburbs that are superficially hardly distinguishable from those of Perth, she feels as if there is more room for her spirit to flourish than humdrum life in Perth allows.

She is honest enough to sprinkle a grain or two of salt on such thoughts, to realise that at the moment she is predisposed to this expansive frame of mind. Expectant grannyhood can do that to you. She has been up here for almost a week, counting down with Claire, awaiting the arrival of her first grandchild. Almost as nervous, almost as excited as Claire, and revelling in the sweetness of this mother-daughter time at such a juncture in their lives.

In a perfect world Joe would be here too. He has yearned for this grandchild as much as she has. But sadly there are reasons for his absence, beyond his work commitments.

A topknot pigeon whirrs in and alights by the desert pea. She is instantly alert, absorbed, delighting in its perky manner as it inspects the ground for seeds. A peck. A crick of its neck. An eye in her direction that feels almost like a greeting. Then gone in a blur of wings.

She would like to linger longer but she is on cooking duties, and though Claire made a joke of it, she let it be known that Geoffrey is a man who likes to have his dinner ready on time. Besides, Joe should be calling soon to report in, and there's no reception out here.

Getting to her feet, she drinks in the view one last time, then turns to the pair of graven birds. She places a hand flat on the smooth rockface beside them, shaded now, but still warm from the sun. She draws in that warmth and energy.

Her thought had been to ask, to summon if she could, a secret blessing for the child about to be born in this land of ancient beings. She makes her plea. And with that act of outreach, of speaking to the land, she feels a lurch, a shift within, that she does not yet understand.

MEA CULPA

Never in his life has Joe felt so foolish. So ashamed. So exposed. When Constable Green smirked, ‘So shall I file this under alleged theft or lost property, Mr Warton?’ he was utterly defenceless.

A call comes the next morning to advise that his car has been towed from a clearway after being found to be the cause of a major traffic jam in last night’s peak hour. ‘All parked vehicles to be removed by four fifteen, sir. No excuses, no exceptions. Here is the number for the vehicle pound.’

Most of Saturday is spent in trains, taxis and offices, sorting towing fees and fines. He stops at the ATM before catching the train into town so he has the cash for the payments. When he finally pulls up in his Bassendean driveway late that afternoon and turns the engine off he sits for a long time, random thoughts cycling.

That high he felt when he realised he had the JKH crew hooked. The beautiful building that he is sure will result; the best since he returned to Perth all those years ago. The bizarreness of the hours since he walked out of the JKH office. Constable bloody Green – what are the odds of encountering the same smart-arse young copper twice in a week! Claire, due today. His weary brain does not know where to settle.

Just as he is about to climb out of the car his phone rings. *Claire – home.* He tries to summon his wits and some cheeriness.

‘Hello my darling girl. The cork’s still in the bottle I gather?’

‘It’s me, you goose,’ says Anne. ‘I’ve been waiting for your call since four o’clock yesterday. How did it go?’



By the time he blows kisses to Claire and hangs up he has made it out to the back verandah. He slumps down into the sofa, and tries to come to terms with what has just happened.

There was not a hint of hesitation in answering Anne's question. 'Mea culpa, mea culpa. It's a goer, Annie Badger. It went so bloody well that we got on the piss to celebrate. But I had to get a cab home, and go back in for the car today. Only just getting back into gear. Sorry about that.'

The lie just slipped out, unplanned. Never has he deceived her so easily.

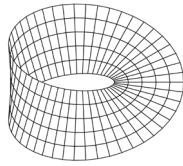
She laughed delightedly. 'I was guessing something like that. Hoping. You clever bugger you.'

The rest of the call whirled by with pregnancy related news and gossip. He held up his end cheerfully, but the only thing that registered clearly was the plan for labour to be induced on Tuesday if bub hasn't arrived by then.

Two big lies in a week. That's not how we operate.

He has no qualms about the first one a week ago. It was honourable, and will be sorted soon. But that one just now? That needs thinking about. It just happened; so easily, so naturally. He is feeling relief at getting away with it more than remorse.

But why the lie?



November 2003

THE FIG TREE

'Ficus macrophylla.'

Joe realises he has said it out loud, and can't help lifting his head for a quick look around to see if anyone might have overheard. Anne can reel off Latin plant names in her sleep, but this is the only one that has ever stuck in his head.

He was stoned the very first time he lay here on the lawn like this, staring up at it; the Moreton Bay fig by Winthrop Hall. That was the first of innumerable visits, and it never ceased to fill him with awe. The trunk a massive stoutness of buttresses surrounding a hidden core. The canopy a calm riot of deep green. And the branches. Oh those branches!

Have they spread even more since then? That one's got to be twenty ... twenty-two metres trunk to tip. Diameter's not much less out near the tip than it is at the trunk. Just hanging there, stately as all hell.



He went through a phase when he would have had the giant chopped down if it was within his power.



That first time! The spring of '69. A Monday morning, before the dawn had come. A full moon setting on a euphoric, life-shaping

night of two seminal events. One took him by storm, the other crept up on him.

They had met at a party on the Saturday. They'd talked and walked the night through, roaming the campus and the river foreshore as they shared their still-young life stories; astonishing themselves and each other with secrets never before shared.

They found a corner deli open and bought the makings for the bacon and eggs breakfast he cooked her back at his share house, with Joe giving thanks that his housemates hadn't made it home. They snuggled through the day exchanging dreams and plans and hopes, and found nothing not to like in each other. And that night they made love.

In the pre-dawn moonlight he walked Anne to her college room. She wanted a few hours to herself before the uni week began. Meandering dreamily back to his place on the other side of the campus, he could not quite believe what had happened, but sensed that his world had just changed its axis.

He found himself sitting down, right here beneath the fig tree. He needed to give the whirl of emotions a chance to settle. In the act of sitting he felt the half-smoked joint in his pocket, forgotten since he had stubbed it out on Saturday night. Without thinking he lit up. Ignoring the damp, he lay back on the grass, the better to relive the last thirty-six hours.

A mighty yawn seized him just as the hempy fug began to creep through his brain. He forced his eyes open, unwilling to surrender to sleep yet. Above him loomed the dark, moonshadowed shape of an enormous limb. For a moment he was disoriented; it was the size of a trunk, not a branch. But it was definitely horizontal. The stoner's predilection for irrelevant obsession took hold and he found himself marvelling at the intricate traceries of the bark.

The size of it though!

It was an effort, but he lifted his head to follow the branch's

length back to where it emerged from the tree's core, then rolled his eyes back to take in its tip. Repeated the process.

How much would it weigh?

He drifted off to sleep thinking not of Anne, but of how the hell it stayed aloft.



'Oi! Fancy a cold shower do yer?'

Joe couldn't work out whether the groundsman's headshake as he turned a tap signified amusement or disgust. He scrambled clear, just ahead of the sprinkler's soaking arc. But the lawn's morning damp had already got him. His cold got worse, and the snuffling and sneezing and running nose were an unwelcome hindrance to that first fortnight of love.



Anne and the fig tree. She joked about being jealous of it, and suggested with that slightly off kilter smile that he should be studying botany instead of architecture. Through the last months of that second year, and into his third, as their romance put down roots, he returned to the tree again and again, sketching, photographing, thinking; his imagination taking wing.

Hearing that Claremont council were about to cut down a big old Moreton Bay for a road widening, he made it there in time to get hold of a fresh-cut length and weighed and measured it, then extrapolated to calculate the weight of one of those big branches. He can't remember the figures now, but they'll be in his old notebooks. It was tons. Literally. It didn't make sense. The sums, and the laws of physics and gravity, said it had to collapse under its own weight.

He also took a bunch of photos with his old Leica, to the annoyance of the council workers who just wanted to get in with the backhoe and start ripping out the stump. That was

where he found the key – or thought he did: studying the old black-and-whites, the cross-section of the sawn-off trunk of the monster, the way the buttresses were entwined with the core, right there in the heart of the beast.

THE FICUS

The drawing is still in his archives, up in the attic. It was beautiful. No-one had any arguments with that. He can conjure it up in his mind instantly.

The Prof always said he was a draftsman as much as an architect. That drawing was his *Mona Lisa*.

He called it ‘the Ficus’.

Credit where credit's due Annie. It was you who christened it.

It was someone else in the firm who'd come up with a technical name, ‘the broad-span buttressed semi-arch’. By the time it was over the smart-arses around the office had come up with a dozen variations on Anne's moniker, but ‘the Fuckus’ was the one that stuck.

He'd started developing the concept on his first big commission here in Perth, the aquatic centre with its beautiful soaring roof that seemed to float over the building. That had got him noticed, and the Prof, who'd still had good contacts in Sydney back then, had put in the word that landed him the job at Hogarths.

Anne hadn't been exactly happy about moving, with Claire still in nappies, but she didn't try to hold him back. At first it had all gone brilliantly. They'd found a rental not too far from the water with a garden for Claire to roam and Anne to dig in, and he rapidly made his mark at Hogarths. Then the call went out for concept plans for the new stadium. There were sceptics inside the firm from the start as well as the enthusiasts, but he got the green light to work the concept up.

The secret was in the buttressing system he devised to strengthen the cantilever effect, and allow for the curvature he needed. That was about the simplest he could ever make it for the layman. The effect was astounding at stadium scale. A graceful, flowing structure with a roof of drooping semi-arches, meeting unsupported at the mid-point, inspired by the notion of a forest glade with a circle of light at its high centre, pierced by a midday sun.

It would have worked. He swears it still. There have been a couple of projects in Europe in the last decade that are on similar lines without taking the concept as far as he did, and with none of the inherent grace of his design. He's never said it to anyone but Anne, but he believes it would've come to be seen as a counterpoint to the Opera House; a second marvel for the city.

It was in the days before computers had taken over the profession. The amount of work involved in getting it from concept to initial design nearly killed him and the two assistants. The pressure as deadline approached was insane. He has always blamed the engineering consultants. Word got out about the failed stress test on the scale model, and when the day came for the presentation to the Minister they refused to give a one hundred percent guarantee on the roof. The Minister wanted two hundred percent. 'If that roof comes crashing down on grand final day ...'

He felt the pregnant silence of the unfinished sentence like the falling of a guillotine. A minimal hand gesture from his boss cut off any attempt to elaborate before he could get started. His gut still twitches uneasily now, more than twenty years later, at the flicker of remembrance of the desolation that swept him as he began packing away the presentation while the bigwigs filed wordlessly out of the room.

For Hogarths, losing the preferred designer status, and then the whole gig, was a major embarrassment. A two-storey office block with an unambiguous order for 'no frills' was his

next assignment. He never did the drawings. They were back in Perth for Claire's third birthday. He still had dreams at that stage though.



'Ficus fuckus. Majestic as ever, and supremely indifferent.'

Four startled eyes swivel in his direction; a pair of student lovers dawdling across the lawn entwined in each other before being disturbed by this strange interruption. The look on their faces causes him to erupt in laughter. 'Don't worry, it's just old age. It'll creep up on you too one day.'