

SECOND INNINGS

On men, mental health
and cricket

BARRY NICHOLLS



FREMANTLE PRESS

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Prologue

It was my Greg Chappell moment. Not his immaculate 131 in the Second Test at Lord's in 1972, walking off to a standing ovation from MCC Members. Or the twin tons against the West Indies at the Gabba in 1975/76. Not even his final 182 against Pakistan at the SCG in early January 1984.

My Greg Chappell moment was like his extended run of ducks in 1981/82. Seven ducks, four in a row in fifteen internationals. This was the bearded, jumpy Chappell in the Australian helmet with temple guards, no front visor. It was the only time he lost his confident swagger. Chappell looked like he'd rather be anywhere but out in the middle. Not that I could blame him. Repeatedly facing 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse' must have been a disillusioning task. Holding, Roberts, Croft, Garner.

And then there were more. Marshall, Davis, Patterson. The West Indian bowlers were relentless. Whistle 'em around your ears at 100 miles per hour. And sometimes on ill-prepared wickets. Like the MCG, where the ball kept low one moment and sailed over your head the next. Greg Chappell's run of ducks. That was me from June 2014 to May 2016. Not one delivery in my half of the pitch. Or at least it felt that way. Ducking and weaving. Tumbling onto my backside. Not really watching the ball.

I use cricket's language and references to describe life. But let me introduce myself. My name is Barry, middle name Milton, as Dad's nod to the famous poet. Growing up, I knew nothing about *Paradise Lost*. All I knew was that Milton the Monster was a character in a 1970s cartoon, and I never filled out my full name on school forms. It was too embarrassing. Still, my cricketing mates called me Milt.

I'm a generation Xer or a cusp baby boomer, depending on which guide you use. A cricket tragic; although I can bowl better off spinners than the former prime minister John Howard in Pakistan 2004 (look it up on YouTube).

My heroes were Ian Chappell, Dennis Lillee, Rod Marsh and Kim Hughes (Three-Tester Wally Edwards for a while but let's limit it to longevity in the game for simplicity.) Full of macho and bravado. Moustaches, long hair and open-chested shirts. Real men didn't cry – until Kim Hughes broke that duck, when he resigned the captaincy against the West Indies and was pilloried across the country.

'Don't cry like a girl,' was a schoolyard taunt if anyone broke down in tears. Aussie cricketers were considered real men. 'Men's men'. That's what I wanted to be. A man's man. Someone who was tough and led by example. Who never backed down or showed any sign of real emotion. Real men always showed up. They drank beer. Sometimes lots of it. The more you drank, the more of a man you were. My dad, Les, was the exception to this rule. He rarely drank. But he was a man's man in other ways.

I grew up in the 1970s, a much different time to now. Gender identity was clear. No unisex toilets. That would have given 1970s mothers a heart attack. No talk of LGBTQI or binary and non-binary sexuality either. Things were

straightforward, or at least they seemed to be. In 2013 I wrote *You Only Get One Innings: Family, Mates and the Wisdom of Cricket*, a story of recollections about what cricket had taught me. But that was only part of the story. What followed started on a slow burn. I was like one of those plots of land with a fifty-year fuel load on a forty-degree day with 100 km/h winds. Just one small spark was all that was needed.

In the ensuing years, there were times I felt so bereft I'd scope out trees on my daily drive to work from Busselton to Bunbury. On average, at least six men in Australia kill themselves every day. Every day six families, friends and communities shatter as a life disappears. Some never find their way out. But eventually I got lucky. Two great doctors helped guide me to the light, and the overriding emotion is one of gratitude. Here's the story.

1. August 2014

The light reflects off metal palings as I pull my car into the hospital grounds. The park is close to full. I negotiate wire fences strewn with orange-coloured plastic and settle on a makeshift area near construction work. Men in hard hats with bored gazes try to look busy. Rather than walking down the beach, I'm soon staring at a slightly off-white wall in the new Busselton hospital. That's me on the red-covered nylon chair. Intent on my mobile phone.

A corkboard of pamphlets. Signs like *Don't mix alcohol with medication* watch on. I did it like everybody else. Walked in the hospital door, turned left past the physiotherapy unit, and then three quick steps toward where I'm going. Said my name.

The receptionist smiled without judgement. 'Thanks Barry, take a seat.'

It's quiet. People rarely raise their voices. All whispers. I dare not look up, in case I see someone I know. It's a small country town. Everyone knows everyone.

A young bloke in his twenties across from me can barely remain still. He's curly-haired, a bit wide-eyed and strung out. Like I used to be before I opened the batting against the new ball. He scrapes his feet forwards and backwards. Like he has paintbrushes on them, colouring the floor.

I feel even more alone. He jolts up like an electric shock, and walks.

Does a lap of a small waiting area and sits again. Like a choreographed movement. His dad moves next to him and holds him gently by the arm, whispering into his ear. It doesn't make much difference. He's jiggling his legs, sighing, his diaphragm slowly moving up and down. Up and down in a sea of pain.

I try to stay composed but I'm *jumpy as*. I'll jump at anything. A bearded doctor with a serious expression opens the door a few metres to my left. He greets the young man. 'Come in please.'

The young patient walks with his head bowed through the door. Like he is defeated. I wonder what his story is. We all have stories, a series of highs and lows. Some are more extreme than others. How things can quickly change. A year ago, life was great. I'd just published a popular and well-received book, I was at the top of my game broadcasting, and family life was great. I seemed to have limitless energy, juggling numerous challenges with ease. But now here I am. Sitting and waiting. To see a man called Dr Fabrizio Goria. Despite the publicity about a lack of mental health access, I get an appointment straight away. A door opens to my left and Dr Goria, a tall, lean psychiatrist in his early forties, pokes his head around the corner.

'Hello, how are you today, Barry?' His approach is informal and friendly. His smile is reassuring.

I nod and follow him into a room with two chairs and a small table. I'm here for him to check medications.

Dr Goria again explains about the serotonin levels in the brain, the feel-good transmitter. The way my mind has been caught in a loop of worry, like there's no off switch. The

thoughts keep being recycled, which just intensifies anxiety.

‘This may take a little while, but we need to find the sweet spot with the medication that’s right for you.’

Sweet spot. That’s a cricketing term. As Dr Gorla gets to know me, he occasionally throws in a sporting metaphor to keep me at ease.

But there’s no respite. Just like Greg Chappell in the early 1980s.

Deep down, I know I just need to watch each ball carefully. Once I start middling a few, I’ll be through this and into my next innings.

And that is ultimately how it turns out, but it will take some time and a whole lot of pain.

And help.

Dust sprays into the sunlight as a thousand memories launch.

The plastic container opens with a creaking sound. Motes rise and magazines fall over the side. I’m in the shed going through old cricket magazines. Found one from around 1982, more broadsheet than magazine. I can’t remember the publication, but it was short-lived.

My eyes track to a story about a player who arrives at the ground only to discover he’s lost his car keys. He starts to panic. All he can think about is how he’s going to find them. His captain wins the toss and he pads up to open the batting against the new ball. He’s still wondering what happened to his keys and what he will have to do if he can’t find them. His anxiety intensifies. He’s lost the ability to think in the present. Like me when it all started in June 2014. Or maybe that’s just when I think it began.

Fiddle with the top of the pad, flick the collar and grab the box. Just like Ian Chappell did and Steve Smith now does. A series of nervous tics. Sometimes called OCD, though it's not. It's a controlled ritualised habit. Scratch my sprigs on the crease. Adopt the batting stance, look up and lightly tap the bat on the ground. The opening bowler prepares to run in. Fielders who have been constantly chirping fall silent. The internal monologue 'lift the bat early and get your feet moving' fades as the umpire calls 'play'.

Cricket and anxiety go together like a hand in a glove. Perhaps that's part of the allure. A game that encourages in small doses and punishes in large measure.

One mistake and you spend the rest of the day watching team mates score the runs you should have. The uncertainty and injustices appeal, doubly so because I am one of a subset of cricketer. I am an opening batsman.

I face the new ball that's hard and shiny and swings. Part of me relishes the challenge. The other part hates it. Facing the quicks, you need to react in an instant. Like you have been trained to in all those net sessions. Sometimes you go into bat after spending most of the day in the field. Knowing it is just long enough to get out but not enough time to make a score.

Cricket's always keeping you in check, making sure you don't get ahead of yourself. Worry is at the heart of the game and many of those who play it. But I have an anxiety that can change gears rapidly from zero to 100 in a few seconds. It also makes me vigilant. To be the best I can be. Some days it turns against me. Today is one of those days. Like a spell has been cast.

I am driving the monotonous stretch of road that is Bussell Highway to Bunbury. Past the small town of Capel on the right, and later the outlying Bunbury suburb of Dalyellup. The same journey. Every day for seven years. Boredom only accentuated by rain and darkened skies in winter.

I listen to talk on the radio. Let it wash over me, half listening, half not. Blah, blah, blah, like a sermon from the mount. Talkback callers spill in with their opinions. Occasionally there is a personal story. My ears prick up. A man on a disability pension speaks. It's a few days after the State Budget and utilities are on the rise again.

'I won't have enough money to heat my house this winter. I'll have to wear three layers of clothing to bed.'

The scenery drifts by. I used to be surprised at the greenery and the lushness of the trees and surrounds. Fresh from Alice Springs, where it was all heat, red dirt and blaring blue skies. It rarely rained, but when it did the Todd River ran and green sprouts rose from the desert sands.

Each day I stare straight ahead with my hands firmly on the steering wheel. I feel like a statue.

Then I don't.

A white four-wheel drive jags off the straight and narrow toward me. Like a shark in the water swiftly changing direction.

I brake. Swing my car hard left onto the gravel. My hands on the steering wheel bounce up and down. I veer away from the road toward a farm fence and stop. Almost a head-on.

That's how quickly it can happen. Like an unplayable ball in a game of cricket. I look in the rear-vision mirror and gradually ease my way back onto the highway.

At lunchtime I go for a walk through a typical suburban shopping plaza. Target, Kmart, cafes and mobile-phone shops fill the centre. Mums with toddlers and aged pensioners have cups of coffee and share stories. It's an encapsulation of modest suburbia where consumerism is king. I'm no different. A discounted Michael Jordan biography sits under my arm.

I'm just through the glass sliding doors. A cold breeze blows, the sort where you wonder if you should be wearing a jumper. My mobile phone rings. My nerves start to jangle in an almost synchronised manner.

'Hello.' I'm talking in that urgent 'let this not be the doctor' kind of way.

'Is that Mr Nicholls?'

'Yes, it is.'

'The doctor would like you to come and see him about your test results.'

'Is it urgent?'

'The doctor would like you to come in and see him about the test results,' she repeats.

I hang up and walk in an uncertain anxious fog. Worst-case scenario? Of course, it is. I feel like Woody Allen's alter ego who's constantly on the lookout for a tumour.

We all have buttons. Buttons can be pushed.

2. Some of life's complexities • 1940s/1970s

It's buried on page five of the newspaper. Just a few lines.

It's quietly, quietly as she goes. The US B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* has dropped the first atom bomb on Hiroshima. The force is felt more than a marathon away. Nearly 150,000 blown away, every building for miles obliterated.

Dad celebrates his eighteenth birthday on 9 August, 1945, when they drop the second one on Nagasaki. Forty thousand killed instantly, double that number eventually lost. Six days later the Japanese surrender. It is front page news then.

Dad never reports for training.

'They knew I was coming,' he says.

He doesn't intend to be flippant about such hideous events, just knows how lucky he was.

'My bones could have been rotting on some Pacific Island.'
Sliding doors.

Dad's brother Uncle Bob, two years older, works for the Railways during the war. Misses the action. It is a burden he carries his entire life. Bob wanted to join up but Cecil, my grandfather, a Great War veteran, won't let him. Not until Bob was twenty-one. But by then it is all over. Cecil gives him a piano as solace. The piano is rarely played.

By the late 1970s, Bob has turned fifty. He is a stickler for

turning up to work each day, in charge of seventy people, helping the trains run on time. But into his fifties, he loses weight, can barely raise a conversation, and becomes reliant on his wife, my Auntie Irene. Bob ages considerably overnight. He tries going back to work for a while but is off the pace. He lives his remaining days on a pension, barely able to answer a question with more than one word.

Well, that's how I remember him. Was it depression? No one knew or would say. You didn't talk about depression in the 1970s.

When the rubber hits the road for me in 2016, I think of Bob. Maybe I've received 'an unplayable ball' at fifty-one and will never hit the ball off the square again.

My mum Margaret Blight grows up on a wheat and sheep farm outside of Waikerie, a small town 100 or so miles from Adelaide. The Riverland is also citrus country. And it's dry. The farms were established under the Soldier Land Settlement Scheme after the Great War.

When the thermometer tips 100 degrees Fahrenheit, Mum and her older brother Geoff sneak away to the banks of the Murray River, swinging off the rope and launching themselves into the dark, cool waters.

Mum rides a horse to Moorook West Primary, a small one-teacher school, a six-and-a-half-mile return trip. Prisoners at the Japanese internment camp run toward her when they see the little girl on the horse approaching. She eventually takes another route to avoid scaring the horse, although I suspect her parents tell her to for other reasons.

Riding to school is part of daily farm life, with chores like milking the cows and moving the sheep between the River farm nearby at Lowbank and the Holder Siding farm

on the train line from Waikerie to Karoonda.

Some days Margaret's mother Elsie buys food and other goods from a paddle steamer; in exchange her dad Billy supplies wood to fuel the boat.

There is no electricity, indoor plumbing or running water, no nearby shops or phone. The nearest town is a bum-numbing, sixteen-mile drive on the back of the buckboard, often over sand drifts and obliterated fence posts.

Inside the house, a large black urn sits on top of the stove, supplying hot water for plates, cups and bath water. Nanna Blight also makes bread, and feeds the farm workers, the pigs and chickens. She renders the extra animal fat to create soap and candles, looks after the vegetable garden, collects the eggs for market and carefully cleans the kerosene glasses for lighting, making sure she doesn't break fragile filaments or spill any kero.

Mum's dad Billy Blight helps organise the workers. Huge draught horses pull the plough, while hands shovel wheat into the winnower, which runs into a bag supported by an iron trolley. Whenever a dust storm sweeps through, wet paper is scattered on the floor to absorb the mess.

By the late 1940s, Europe is recovering from the scorched-earth policy of the Second World War. The price of wheat goes sky high. The Korean War later dramatically pushes up the price of wool. Better than average rainfall means that for a while the good times roll. Mum and Geoff are sent to boarding schools in Adelaide. A big new American sedan arrives on the farm. A few years later Nanna takes a well-deserved rest and cruises to England, visiting relatives in Hull. But good times never last.

Mum's dad Billy Blight has three children from his first marriage to Margaret (Maggie). It is a shotgun wedding in July 1909. Along comes Amy, Billy Junior and then Ambrose. Maggie dies of typhoid in December 1915, six months after Billy departs for The Great War. Billy might have been glad to get away. His wife's sister, Georgina, who lived with Billy and Maggie, is pregnant with his child when he goes.

Billy is part of the 32nd Battalion that fought on the Western Front. They sail on 18 November 1915 on the HMAT A2 *Geelong*. The battalion travels from Alexandria to Egypt for training next to the pyramids and then a crowded train journey to Marseille in southern France. From there they are transported to the front.

Three days later they are slaughtered in the mud and the mind-rattling noise of constant shelling. There are 718 casualties – ninety percent of the battalion. Billy is hit in the hip and lungs but somehow survives. The battalion is sent to the front again. By September 1917, they are in Belgium. My grandfather is incapacitated. This time it's shell shock.

During leave in Cornwall for two weeks, he gets engaged to one of his second cousins. Then he leaves for Australia. Burns his bridges. Billy is shipped to Melbourne, then by rail to Adelaide.

Billy meets my nanna, Elsie Wilkinson-Watkinson, walking along the beach at Taperoo where they'd been demobbing. Elsie's dad was a pub owner in Hull who brought his eleven kids to Australia to get away from his second wife. She followed them out anyway. But Elsie's dad took up with his younger housekeeper, Greta. As a young girl, Margaret used to catch them in bed when she stayed over.

Billy might have smiled at all this, but he's just been diagnosed with a precursor to tuberculosis. He isn't the only one, coming from the wet conditions of the trenches. He thinks he will move to a dryer climate. Also, away from Penola in the south-east. And the scandal of his first wife's sister.

After Billy marries Elsie, they take up a farm in Waikerie, surrounded by German immigrants from the early 1900s.

Life is far from smooth sailing.

Billy's kids eventually return home. The two boys, Billy Junior and Ambrose, struggle to connect with their father in any meaningful way. Amy is treated more like a maid than a daughter.

In the photo, Ambrose sits in the front row of the 1935 Polwarth Football League premiers, a member of the Birregurra football team. He's twenty-one and built like a brick outhouse. Ambrose has been living and working with his older brother Billy as a labourer in the Otway Ranges.

He is a handy cricketer too. Ambrose once takes six for forty for the small SA town eighty miles north-east of Adelaide, Blanchetown against Ramco, five bowled, including two Darlings, relations of former Test captain Joe Darling.

In 1940, he trains as a chalkie in Adelaide before being posted to a one-teacher school at Woods Flat near Morgan in South Australia.

He isn't going to enlist, but Billy Senior thinks it a good idea. He says Ambrose should do 'his bit', so he enlists in the air force in 1942.

As a little girl, my mum Margaret is close to her stepsister Amy. Puts her head on Amy's shoulder. Amy is more like a

mum than her own. Amy marries Edgar and moves to his fruit block near Ramco where my mum goes for sleepovers. But Amy of the gentle touch dies of consumption in 1941 in the Waikerie hospital and is buried in the Ramco Cemetery.

‘Here you go, shove this in your pocket.’

Mum takes the penny as a keepsake. It’s the last thing Ambrose does before he leaves for interstate.

Patricia’s the flame-haired girl who catches his attention in Sydney. He has a girlfriend in Morgan near Waikerie, but he marries Patricia anyway, on his way to becoming a navigator on a Lancaster bomber, flying missions over Germany. On August 24, 1942, he sets sail on the troop ship *Westernland*, arriving in England three months later. Flight training takes Ambrose to most corners of England and to Scotland.

He can read maps well and is transferred to Litchfield to crew up – it is the place where crews come together through word of mouth.

A letter home describes a bus trip to Cornwall, through twisted and narrow streets, its gutted churches ‘roofless and gaping’ where German bombs have struck.

In England’s south-west, Ambrose tries to rebuild broken family connections. He meets May, the cousin Billy jilted all those years before. Ambrose even takes his own wedding photos from Sydney to show.

Flight training restarts with an urgency not seen before. There are simulated night fighter attacks escaping from searchlight combing. The fatigue, freezing cold and airsickness are just a hint of what was to follow.

In June 1943, the crew receives an above-average rating and is assigned to a four-engine Wellington at No. 466 Squadron, Leconfield. At the urging of the crew, dissatisfied that their plane has been superseded by the Lancaster, the pilot Stan Ireland meets his superiors at Australia House and challenges the assignment.

Soon they are doing three-week conversion training on Lancasters at RAF Lindholme in Yorkshire. Lancasters carry fire bombs, more than a thousand four-pounders, as well as special incendiaries including 56 thirty-pounders. Their job is delivering death. Also on board is a powerful enough cookie to burst open blocks of flats to clear the way.

Roll the dice. Thirty missions for the Aussies and Brits. Twenty-five for the Yanks. Bomber Command loses more than fifty percent. Eight missions is the average before you are toast.

The crew's first bombing mission to Nürnberg is uneventful despite an equipment failure and an unscheduled landing to refuel.

Missions take seven and a half hours, most of those terrifying. They bomb Mannheim, Hannover, Bochum, Hagen, Ludwigshafen, Kassel, Modane and Munich.

Ambrose is a prolific letter writer. After a raid on Munich on September 30, 1943, he writes:

...as we approached [the target] we were coned by searchlights and had to do very violent evasive action ... after three or four minutes we were out of them ... to be caught in searchlights, worse still to be coned, and particularly over the target is fatal.

We could have dropped our bombs at random

and scrambled, but no – we straightened up for our bombing run and as we did so, we were attacked by a fighter who fired a burst into us before we knew anything, we felt the hit, the plane shuddered, and we smelt the acid smell of the smoke and cordite in our nostrils.

The raid on Leipzig fails. Their oxygen masks malfunction and then they encounter a storm they cannot avoid. Engines stall and Ambrose writes that the plane ‘dropped out of the sky like a log’. They limp home mostly avoiding flak as they cross the international border. Two engines fail. ‘What a relief to be back. I cannot describe the tense feeling at the time, or the great feeling of relief and flatness on return.’

Eighteen missions down. Over 130 days, an average of one a week, but for a brief period they fly every second night.

On a cold clear December 29, 1943, Ambrose is part of the crew of a Lancaster III JB-607 (AR-N) bomber nicknamed *Leader*. She takes off for Berlin on her nineteenth mission with seven crew on board. *Leader* is one of twenty-four aircraft departing from Binbrook. They leave just after 5pm.

They are nearing home when they begin to relax. The crew talk about what they’ll do when they are out of this shithole and back in Australia.

They’re over the border into Holland when a German Messerschmitt Bf 110G night fighter finds them.

Four are mortally wounded. The plane explodes and crashes into a garden of a monastery in Bleijerheide near Kerkrade. The wreckage spreads to a nearby football pitch. Monks join the local Brandweer, the Dutch fire department, to douse the flames.

Only one crew member survives: twenty-two-year-old flight engineer air bomber Frank Seery. He jumps out as the pilot puts the plane in a spiral and is captured and held as a POW for the remainder of the war.

January 1944. It's a hot summer's day early in the new year. Nanna Blight prepares lunch, wiping the beads of sweat from her brow with her forearms. The family gathers in the lounge room of the Holder Siding farm.

Geoff, the apple of his mother's eye, is chipper. He has just rowed in the Head of the River. Geoff is also a boxer, a prefect, a swimmer and a lieutenant in the cadets at Scotch College.

Billy is standing in the kitchen stretching, after a morning mending fences.

There is a knock at the door.

'Deeply regret to inform that your son Ambrose Edward Blight ...'

Billy struggles to stay on his feet. He weeps in his armchair.

It is the only time my mum sees her dad cry.

In the fog of war, false news circulates. Ambrose and some of the crew have been shot down while trying to parachute, a helpless way to die.

Billy carries that image of his son's death with him until a decade later, when he is his mid-sixties and he drops dead walking out the front door. Through the window, Elsie sees him fall, and she drops the dishes in the kitchen.