



HERE GOES NOTHING

A NOVEL

STEVE TOLTZ

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ALSO BY STEVE TOLTZ

A Fraction of the Whole
Quicksand

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HERE GOES NOTHING

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FOR MY PARENTS

HERE GOES NOTHING

Nobody was ever thinking about me.

Now that I'm dead, I dwell on this kind of thing a lot: how I often made life choices to avoid the disapproval of those who hadn't even noticed me standing there; how I longed to be liked by the very people I disliked in case finding me objectionable was contagious and would spread throughout the general population; how—and here's the sad truth—if all my reversals of fortune had been private, I'd have been mostly fine with them.

That's not all I lament; why hadn't I seen more of our world? Why did I never skydive or sexually experiment? Why exactly was I so uninterested in touching a dick? So what if I was heterosexual? Don't most vegetarians eat fish? And why was I so convinced that every supernatural belief was just an embarrassing throwback to the pre-scientific age? I had my irrational fears, of course: of mannequins and steep slopes and being stared at, but never of the dark, of the

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dead, or any kind of afterlife. To me, heaven was a childish dream, purgatory an obvious metaphor, hell credible only on earth, and the very notion of an immortal soul was only a way to avoid facing our imminent trip to Nowhere.

It's humiliating how wrong you can be.

ONE

*Danger is near . . . We must creep into a very tiny space.
If we can, we must creep into an orange. You and I!
Or even better, into a grape!*

Federico García Lorca



The beginning of the end—

Huge iron-grey cloud banks lay motionless above our little house, the dawn skies fading. The finger of a nervous stranger in a flannel shirt lingered on the doorbell.

This was arguably the most significant moment of my life.

I wasn't there.

My side of the bed was cold and empty. Gracie woke afraid and irritated because I hadn't come home again. Staggering off the bed, she threw on her robe, clomped down the stairs and flung open the front door: the short, balding man on the porch was in his late sixties, owlsh with thick eyebrows, his forehead shiny where the hairline receded.

'Sorry to bother you, miss,' he said. 'My name is Owen Fogel, and you don't know me.'

'I *know* I don't know you,' Gracie said, annoyed. 'You don't think I know who I don't know?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you want, my money or my time?'

'I grew up in this house. Forty years ago.'

'My time, then.'

'Mind if I come in?'

'Did you leave something here?'

He couldn't tell if she was joking. 'I'm just wondering if I could come in and look around, you know, for old time's sake.'

Old time's sake? Gracie couldn't see how that expression related to a stranger demanding access to her private home.

'Haven't you ever gone somewhere,' he said, 'just to get a sense of where you came from?'

'Nope.'

'You never went back to an old school or an old job or the place where you lost your virginity?'

'I lost my virginity in the back of a bus.'

'I retract my example.'

Gracie gazed across the quiet street, then back to the blushing stranger now smiling with his tight mouth. 'Visiting the past because you're nostalgic is like drinking sea water when you're dying of thirst. It'll only make you thirstier. And it's gross. Why would you do it in front of a complete stranger?' she asked.

'It's a long story and I'd rather not tell it on the front steps.'

'Oh well. Next time you'll remember to cut it short.'

Gracie heaved the door shut. Fuck that guy. What an odious intrusion. She eyed the couch, lusting for sleep.

The doorbell rang again.

Through the peephole, the man's desolate figure was sulking in

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the patchy sunlight, his finger jabbing the doorbell insistently. Gracie grew frightened.

‘I’m calling the police!’

‘I’m dying.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me.’

Now he crept forward a little. ‘I’m sorry to be intruding,’ he said through the door. ‘And I’m sorry that pretty soon I won’t be bothering anybody ever again. Most of all I’m sorry that my *dying wish* is to come and look around this stupid house and remember my mother and father.’

Gracie opened the door and steadily regarded the visitor; his body may have fallen on hard times, but he looked robust enough to survive the morning. ‘I don’t like you looking at me like you’ve come to collect a debt,’ she said, pressing her lips together, ‘but you can come in.’

‘Should I take off my shoes?’

‘Don’t bother. You won’t be staying long.’

2

The dying visitor stood in the middle of the living room, as if unable to choose a direction to walk in.

‘Go on, then. Have a look-see.’

He crossed the creaky floorboards from the TV to the potted cactus under the corner window. He made a cursory inspection of the floating shelves, the wallpaper map of the world, the cracked leather couch, the armchair, the enormous industrial fan. He stared at the odd religious paraphernalia—a Star of David that hung over a faded painting of Ganesh next to a wooden pentagram—and then fondled the fibre-optic Christmas tree with palpable sadness.

‘If it isn’t taken down by July,’ she said, ‘it makes sense to keep it there until December.’

He didn’t nod his head so much as waggle it.

‘What did you say your name was?’ asked Gracie.

‘Owen. Owen Fogel,’ he said and then muttered, almost to himself, ‘So much happened here.’

‘For instance?’

‘Puberty. I did a lot of violence to my body in those years.’

‘Terrific.’

He spoke in a strange, faraway voice: ‘Life is a funny thing.’

‘How banal.’

He eyed her, transfixed, as if he’d had a sad insight and was resisting a powerful urge to share it.

‘What?’ she asked, suspiciously.

‘Was I staring?’

‘Like you’re a lip reader waiting for me to say something.’

He laughed. ‘Sorry. It’s just sometimes, when you’re not prepared, a beautiful face can be startling.’

Gracie froze, suddenly self-conscious to be wearing only a robe, disturbed by the possibility of what she had ushered into her house. Owen had sinewy arms that could easily overpower her. She heard a low-level ting and realised it was coming from a beige hearing aid in Owen’s ear. So what? That didn’t mean he wasn’t a monster.

‘My husband will be home any moment.’

‘It’s so early. He didn’t come home last night.’

She dug her fingernails into her palms. ‘No, I mean . . .’

‘Has he done that before? I’m sure he just fell asleep on a friend’s couch. Isn’t that what they always say? “I must have passed out.” Or, wait, “I was too drunk to drive and it was too late to call.” Classic.’

She swallowed a *fuck you*. ‘Are you even dying?’

‘I am. Truly.’ He caught the panicked glint in her eyes. ‘Wait. Am I making you anxious?’

‘Yes.’

‘Please don’t be.’ There was only sorrow in his voice. Maybe the worst that would happen was that she’d be forced to endure his story or attend to a seizure.

'Just keep three feet away from me.'

'I only know the metric system.'

'Are you kidding me right now?'

'May I continue the tour?' he asked in a placating voice. Gracie nodded warily.

He moved skittishly around the room, sighing at the cracked walls, the peeling wallpaper, the blistered paint. He fingered the dust that covered the broken jukebox and even squatted in the corner, as if to get a child's point of view. That he only seemed dimly mindful of Gracie's presence somewhat alleviated her fears.

'Is it okay if I go that way?' he asked, gesturing to the kitchen.

'I guess.'

In the kitchen, Owen brushed his hands along the cabinets and the countertop while sneering at the apparent smoke damage from stovetop fires. He moved into the damp laundry and tromped down the steps to the pitch-dark basement. Gracie fished a corkscrew out of an ice bucket and slipped it into the pocket of her robe. Owen emerged from the basement and walked to the sunlit studio at the end of the house before circling back to the living room.

'May I look in the bedrooms?'

'Wow. Rude.'

'Is that a no?'

'Oh, whatever. Help yourself.'

Owen smiled politely then disappeared down the stained-carpeted hallway. Gracie made a coffee and smoked two cigarettes while imagining Owen masturbating on her bed. She thought: He'll come on my pillow soon and leave. Or he'll fall over and sue us. Something absurd will come of this.

Now she could hear a clatter in the bathroom and the sound of phlegm hawked into the sink. She made a mental note to incinerate the handtowels.

He returned to the living room combing what little hair he had with his wet fingers.

‘How long have you lived here?’

‘Two years.’

He moved around the room at the speed of someone trying to walk up a down escalator. Gracie fondled the corkscrew in her pocket and said, ‘I can’t remember if we were supposed to get the best house on the worst street or the worst house on the best street.’

‘I don’t think this one’s either.’

Gracie was still uneasy. The only sound was the *chit-chit-chit* of Mrs Henderson’s sprinklers, which were turned on in defiance of the water restrictions.

‘Well, thanks for stopping by,’ she said.

‘What do you do for work?’

‘I’m a marriage celebrant.’

‘Interesting!’

It occurred to Gracie that Owen’s grin seemed bogus, an instant red flag; when you’ve just met someone, you shouldn’t be able to tell their fake smile from their genuine one.

‘Newlyweds are refugees fleeing single life,’ she said. ‘Most people totally misrepresent themselves and enter into legally binding, life-long marital agreements dragging a trail of half-truths. They’ll do anything to grow old with someone overnight.’

‘Huh?’ An astonished look crossed his face, but it seemed routine, as if it was his tendency to be surprised. ‘How did you get into this profession?’

Her nervousness prevented her from escaping this conversation, which had now run away from her.

‘It’s kind of a funny story.’

‘Is it?’

‘About ten years ago, my best friend Tara asked me to officiate her wedding. I had to do a one-month course at TAFE. Now that I’m saying it out loud, it’s not really that funny a story at all, is it?’

‘Not really, no. You get clients?’

‘Every weekend. Mooney videos the weddings. We’re a one-stop wedding shop.’

‘What’s a Mooney?’

‘Angus Mooney. My husband.’

‘The missing husband.’

‘He’s *not* missing.’

He made a ‘poor baby’ pout of his lips. ‘Do you enjoy marrying people?’

‘I’m usually freaked out that I’m going to ruin their special day, but I love it.’

‘Do you?’

‘It’s my calling,’ she said, earnestly.

She fished the corkscrew out of her pocket and fingered it openly, looking Owen directly in the eye. It was time for this lonesome, death-haunted man to get out of the house. ‘Anyway, as I said, thanks for stopping by.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Where’s the next stop on your nostalgia tour?’

‘Nowhere. This is it.’

‘Have you seen everything you want to see?’

An abrupt smile appeared on Owen’s face, as if he had just suffered an unwanted spasm of good cheer. He sat on the cracked leather armchair and eased back into it.

‘Not quite,’ he said.

3

Until my death, I had never had what could be described as a mystical experience. What I had instead was a sneering contempt for the supernatural, which I blamed on a childhood inundated by believers of all persuasions and levels of fanaticism. Everyone was convinced of one fool thing or another. Nobody around me was a sceptic; kids and adults alike were having ‘experiences’, although never in the presence of a corroborating witness. It was hard not to be suspicious.

At the age of three, my birth parents abandoned me—the shits—after a seemingly minor skirmish with community services. By my eighteenth birthday, I had been fostered, but never adopted, in four strangers’ homes, every one of them by a major freeway, every arrival arbitrary, every departure inevitable.

The first house I can barely remember but for a mother figure at the bedroom door tolerantly explaining that, ‘There is nothing in the dark that wasn’t there in the light.’ It made perfect sense to me, but that logic had no effect on the inconsolably panic-stricken twin

brother and sister in the adjacent bunk bed who'd flick on the lights, climb into the same bed and cry themselves to sleep. Each night, the same dismal routine, and never the lesson learned: the dark had sinister potential, sure, but it never delivered.

The second house was a red-brick bungalow tucked away in a cul-de-sac where I shared a narrow bedroom with a sad-eyed foster sister, Emma. We used to cry at night together—they called us 'soblings'. I remember the hoarse-voiced foster mother on the edge of my bed telling me that 'everything happens for a reason', that it was 'meant to be' that my parents couldn't take care of me, and that 'karma' would get them in the end. Emma, meanwhile, rattled on about the literal monsters lurking under the floorboards. I was resistant to the whole idea. If monsters were real, I argued, why had we never seen a single one caught, killed and paraded on the news? It was only at night, when she lay in bed immobilised with fear, that I could get any rest.

At the age of eight, I was moved into a weatherboard house in Kensington with the Brocks, an old couple who were almost *too* kind and sympathetic, as if they'd mistaken foster care for palliative care. There was nothing scary in that house other than Mr Brock shouting 'Breakfast!' like a carnival barker, one 'uncle' always looking at me ominously as he applied lip balm, and a grandfather who'd seen a UFO one September night twenty years earlier—a pulsating orange globe—and would often recount the time he'd been visited by the vessel's alien pilot. 'I woke up to find it at the foot of my bed,' he said, in a throaty whisper. 'It didn't say anything, but its superior alien intelligence was clear. He wanted me to know we are not alone.' Sometimes he would read from his favourite book, *Chariots of the Gods*, whose author travelled interdimensionally to uncover the true history of the universe; other times he would just wave it at us and say, 'When the alien returns to take me with them, it might take you too.' There was always one silent child who listened with the force

of a scream. I'd think, why would an alien visit *him* of all people, and not someone famous, powerful or wise? I read the faces of the other adults as he told his stories and learned for the first time what it was to feel embarrassed for another person.

Of the fourth house, in Meadowbank, two blocks from the Parramatta River, I remember the always-expired milk in the fridge, the apricot bathroom tiles smudged with dirty footprints, and the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus garden sculpture in the backyard that I'd often stare at through the leadlight windows at the end of the hall. The house belonged to a paediatrician, Dr Fitzsimmons, and his wife, Beverly. Their wedding photos showed they got married barefoot. Above the fireplace was a plaque that read: *If you lived here, you'd be home by now.* Their own child had died from meningococcal disease. My first night in their home, three days before my twelfth birthday, a kid named Ernie told me the child's ghost moped in the dusty corner of the room.

Ernie also tricked me into swallowing tadpoles, then told me that frogs would grow in my stomach unless I took a powerful laxative to shit them out, and made me drink the MiraLAX that was for Dr Fitzsimmons's upcoming colonoscopy. I emerged from the toilet two hours later to find Ernie doubled over with laughter.

'That was hilarious. You okay, Numbat?'

'My name's Angus. People call me Mooney.'

'Yeah but Numbat's better. Ever seen one? It's the termite-eating pointy-faced marsupial you look like.'

I shrugged it off. Being called names has never particularly bothered me. I find insults amusing if they aren't true, and a free life lesson if they are.

'Ernie!' Dr Fitzsimmons was standing at the bedroom door. 'Don't say things like that. You are *all* beautiful children.' I thought: why does everyone on the planet earth *have* to be beautiful?

What kind of value system is that? He said: ‘Remember, Ernie: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some have entertained angels unawares.”’

Ernie gave him the finger. Dr Fitzsimmons smiled and said, ‘Oh, you!’ Then he bowed and turned off the light. It only now occurs to me how accepting he and his wife were of our ingratitude.

The shadows looked like cold animals crouched in the dark. Ernie crept across the room and perched on the edge of my bed. I was scared—I thought he’d come to torture me—but he whispered, ‘Don’t worry, Numbat. Things will get easier with time.’ (Now I understand: *of course* things get easier with time. That’s how desensitisation to pain works.)

Ernie soon schooled me on the way things were run in the Fitzsimmons house. Mild physical abuse was defined as horseplay, nobody respected anyone’s toothbrush (I kept mine in our bedroom), games of hide-and-seek were only a means to abandon someone, and if you wanted to steal a cigarette, your best bet was Beverly Fitzsimmons, who went through a pack and a half of Horizons a day. A steady smoke rose from her and, from behind, it looked like her head was made of dry ice. She wore cat’s-eye sunglasses inside the sunlit kitchen and read all our horoscopes like a town crier. She believed her dreams were prophetic yet only recounted them *after* the events they predicted had come to pass. If one of the kids fell off the roof, she’d say, ‘That’s so amazing. I dreamed last night that you were falling.’ You just had to stand there like a dolt and pretend to believe it.

It was Beverly who made me suspect that even so much as wishing upon a star was an act of self-aggrandisement. It was also Beverly who often called me an old soul. I never took it as a compliment. To accuse a child of wisdom beyond their years is to imply they’re abnormally devoid of youthful enthusiasm and naiveté. I mean, what’s so great about saying to a kid, ‘Hey, old man . . .?’

Meanwhile, Dr Fitzsimmons always consoled us about our fucked-up biological families by saying, ‘The Lord works in mysterious ways.’ That made no sense. It’s pretty easy to understand why the devil is wily—but why must God be too?

I put up with a lot during my childhood, and the Almighty was just another nuisance. I remember a Sunday when seven of us children were forced into itchy suits and herded down to St Michael’s, where Beverly was being confirmed. Over breakfast, Dr Fitzsimmons had presented her with a silver crucifix and explained to us that even though Beverly had been born into the Church of England, from this day on she would be a Catholic.

‘How does that even work?’ I asked.

‘What do you mean?’

There was never anything so inexplicable to me as those who could switch between incompatible eternal truths without breaking a sweat.

‘There’s only two directions in life, Angus,’ she said. ‘A turn towards God and a turn away from Him.’ I already knew then that I’d prefer to go around.

At St Michael’s, the bishop stood at the pulpit beneath an ostentatious cross, carrying on melodramatically like he was a character in an Agatha Christie novel. It’s always the same with these guys. They never let you forget that Jesus is dead, that it was foul play, and that you’re the main suspect.

At some point I fell asleep and had to be shaken awake to see the bishop touching Beverly’s forehead with his bent finger, saying, ‘Do you reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises?’

She said, ‘I do.’

He went on about the risen Christ, how he was there in our very midst, and how Beverly belonged to Jesus now. Then he gently

stroked the side of her face and said, 'Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.' That was it. She was a Catholic now.

The bishop smiled with the seedy delight of a lothario who'd just notched another sexual conquest. I looked at the newly confirmed congregants. Their souls didn't seem eternal. They didn't even seem like they'd last the week.

'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.' The parishioners all said 'amen' at the same time and I resisted the urge to say, 'Jinx.'

Ernie pulled a Sharpie out of his pocket and drew a pentagram on the back of the pew.

'They're going to see you,' I said.

With his right hand he gave me the sign of the devil.

Ernie was a goth and an amateur Satanist. He and his depressing friends wore black, smudged their eyeliner and tried to contact the dead with a homemade ouija board. (These séances were a chaotic mess; someone was always bursting into nervous laughter or silently fingering someone else under the table.) Otherwise they drew pentagrams in the dirt and sat around bonfires and got fucked up.

The devil never made any sense to me, conceptually, and still doesn't; for me his motivations are just too evil to be believable. Personally, I never met a torturer who wasn't well-meaning.

Dr Fitzsimmons was diagnosed with cancer six months later. It was vaguely embarrassing to watch his struggle. He'd sit at the kitchen table and say, 'Don't worry, everybody. I'm too young to die!' I immediately understood that Death is an abusive partner, gas-lighting you with sunshine and dawns.

We were all present for his final breath. Beverly said it comforted him to have us all sprawled across the dusky room, though I doubted he noticed; he was wafting in and out of sleep. When it happened, he

wheezed, his face registered a complaint, then he was gone. Everyone reported a different version of observing the spirit leaving his body. Somehow, I was the only one who didn't see anything at all.

The following Saturday night, Ernie held a séance. I watched the stupid, solemn faces of him and his friends bursting with a power they did not possess. They thought they had the kind of shoulders ghosts like to cry on. As we clasped sweaty hands, Ernie said, 'Dr Fitzsimmons, I feel your presence. Are you here among us?'

I whispered, 'Sorry to call at such a late hour.'

'Shut up, Numbat,' Ernie said.

Frankly, nothing said about ghosts ever made sense to me. Why moan? A voice in the dark saying plainly, 'Hey. Nice to see you,' would petrify me more. And why are they always stuck in their murder houses like convicted criminals with ankle monitors on house arrest? And why did ghosts stop rattling chains at the same time in human history that men stopped wearing hats? And why don't ghosts appear so much in the day? It never made sense to me that ghosts, as well as being dead, are reputedly night owls.

'He's here,' said Ernie, grinning. 'I can feel him. Can you feel him too?'

I could not.

'Can you hear him?'

I could not.

In my opinion, most paranormal phenomena are debunked by the spiritualist's own shit-eating grin. It annoyed me how people professed to believe in the unseen world and then bored you with how they'd seen it. To make it worse, they looked at you with pity, as if they were born with superior antennae and you were too physically and mentally underdeveloped to perceive the invisible.

The summer I turned sixteen, Ernie and I were arrested inside a neighbour's house. We'd broken in when they were at work to

raid their booze and play video games, and we'd made the crucial error of forgetting to not pass out drunk. We were both sentenced to community service in an aged-care facility in Ryde, where we witnessed the daily tragedy of people who'd come to the end of an unforgettable journey only to have completely forgotten it. It wasn't just disturbing that these terminally confused folks had some very dirty things to say about destiny but that almost all of them believed the dead were alive and the past was the present. They resurrected their loved ones right in front of you, or *inside* you, and were distraught when you couldn't play along. It was painfully clear that these mistaken beliefs were the result of either damage to or deterioration of the brain. I took that as yet another lesson that the subjective experience is unworthy of respect.

Soon after that, the era of relying on the kindness of strangers came to an end. Ernie moved out into a share house in Dulwich Hill. I turned eighteen shortly after and moved in with him, sort of: my home was a corrugated iron shed in his backyard. It didn't have a bathroom but I could piss in the bushes, shower under a garden hose, and shit in the McDonald's up the road. Unbelievably, I lived there for most of my twenties.

Ernie had hooked up with his housemate, Lisa. They were disgustingly in love. The worst thing about them as a couple was how they would feed each other over dinner; the worst thing about Lisa as an individual was how she mistook every banal coincidence for synchronicity and honeyed with meaning whatever blew across her path. She wouldn't shut up about how everything in the universe was connected and how she was at the epicentre of it. She really was the empress of us all; her gods were working hard for her. 'Even you were sent here to me,' she said one night. It was Lisa who gave me the first clue that 'spirituality' could be a splashy form of self-obsession.

One night we were drinking in the garden beside the firepit and I told her about my birth parents abandoning me. Lisa closed her eyes and made a face as if she were on the precipice of confessing someone else's darkest secret. I didn't want to hear it. She said, 'The universe is telling me that they are ready to ask for your forgiveness.'

I said: 'I doubt it.'

She said, 'This is something that's going to change your life, Mooney.'

For all my life I'd hated my birth parents as if it was my profession, but was this the time to search for them? I was eighteen—not a man, exactly, but some form of adult. I said, 'Yeah, no. That's bullshit. Not interested in those fuckers.'

Lisa laughed and said, 'You're trying to not be born.' I laughed too, even though it was the most serious thing that anyone had ever said to me.

The woman at the foster care agency gave me the address. Their names were Joel and Dawn Mooney, and unless they were brother and sister or father and daughter, the news that I had been given up by a married couple sent me into an even angrier depression.

They lived on Giffnock Avenue in Macquarie Park. It took me only forty-five minutes to get to their perfectly ordinary and pleasant-looking house. It was galling. I could've grown up there.

I pounded on the door. When it opened, an old leathery woman with white chin hairs shouted, 'What do you want?'

I smiled apologetically and gave her a brief summation of my quest. While I spoke, the old woman just stood there smoking, ash falling off her cigarette onto her bare foot.

'They're dead,' she said.

So that's what an axe to the chest felt like.

'Both of them?'

'One after the other.'

‘When?’

‘About five years ago.’

‘How?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Well . . . yes.’

She sighed. ‘Your father drank too much piss and drowned in the Hawkesbury. Two years later, your mother went through her own windscreen. Stupid girl hadn’t worn a seatbelt for twenty-five years.’

‘Then aren’t you . . .?’

‘What? Your mother was my daughter. Is that what you’re getting at?’

My eyes grew too large to contain the tears. ‘Doesn’t that make you my grandmother?’

‘All right, Einstein. So what?’

Every fibre of my being felt rejected. This terrible woman who was my grandmother heaved an impatient sigh and said, ‘We done?’ then slammed the door in my face.

Maybe my anger and bitterness from that encounter contributed to the regrettable way I lived the following decade.

It started trivially: getting blackout drunk and into fights. Committing juvenile, pointless crimes so dumb you couldn’t in good conscience call them crimes—they were more like pranks that occasionally pulled a small profit. Then Ernie and I started smashing car windows for loose change and breaking into houses, where we thought everything was worth stealing—there’s no doubt we had a hoarder’s taste for larceny. We also took stupid quantities of amphetamines and barely noticed the transition from using to selling. I won’t say that I never soiled myself.

I never entirely forgave Lisa for getting my hopes up about my parents. She continued ‘communicating’ with bogus otherworldly

presences, and if she said, 'I felt something,' I'd just say, 'Me too.' When she said, 'My dream came true last night,' I'd say, 'So did mine! So weird, right?' It drove her crazy. Her other most repeated expression of mystical power was the prophecy that, one of these days, Ernie and I would go too far. Obviously she wasn't the oracle she thought she was, but she also wasn't wrong.

It was a bit of a blur, but here were the ingredients: a drizzly Saturday night, us stone broke and lurking on Victoria Street, an oily businessman hailing a cab, Ernie grabbing his briefcase and twisting his arm behind his back.

'This is a bit unfriendly,' the victim said, before elbowing Ernie in the groin.

Whatever it was Ernie did with his fists, the man went down hard. His head hit the gutter with an audible crack; there was a distressing amount of blood. A young kid shrieked from inside a parked car and I remember thinking: here's an indelible childhood memory for you. People rushed out of their houses and we darted off, not knowing if our victim was alive or dead.

To my absolute surprise, a few days later Ernie dragged me with him into the church on Harrington Street. Next to the altar and rough-hewn statue of Christ, there was a confession booth. Was he serious? Apparently so.

After Ernie's turn, I slid back the curtain and entered. It was cool inside. The priest's silhouette was rocking gently. I didn't know the etiquette that surrounded this corny transaction, but here he was: a master of silences, practising his art. The temptation to say *cunt fuck shit* was almost overpowering.

'Take your time,' he said, amiably. I could hear him smiling through the grate.

I had a hundred petty confessions as well as this big one, the line I'd recently crossed, but I hesitated to utter any of them aloud.

How could I know this priest didn't have a legal obligation to inform the police? Or, worse: How did I know he wasn't gathering material for a novel?

The priest leaned forward in anticipation. I thought that what the confession booth had the most in common with was the peep show, or the partition dividing a cab driver from his potentially lethal client. 'I know I said to take your time,' the priest said, 'but I do have an appointment at two.'

'On second thought, Father, why should I tell you anything?'

'For God's forgiveness.'

'So *you* say.'

How reliable was this guy? Maybe he'd *say* I was forgiven, but maybe when I died, I'd wind up boiling in a lake of fire, thinking, 'Wait until I get my hands on that priest!'

'You must have faith.'

'Piss on that.'

I left the confessional and sat watching the priest. He had to dress in black, even in summer. He moved about the world with everyone thinking he was a paedophile, or at the very least broke bread with paedophiles.

The other people scattered in the pews were an enigma to me too. Who kneels in a church on a Wednesday afternoon? It seemed to me that if these folks just had someone to look them in the eye they would be fine. Why were so many people susceptible to God and I was not? And who even wants to be? I always hated how, even on his best days, He could be merciful but never actually kind.

Ernie sat down next to me, loud-whispering about scoring speed, and I realised I had to distance myself from him or I'd wind up dead or in jail. A priest nearby was talking about his old bugbear—sin. 'What a load of shit,' I heard myself say.

HERE GOES NOTHING

Back then, I couldn't hide my intolerance. The way I saw it, faith in the Lord was like walking around in a suit of gold that looks fancy but weighs you down, Satanic worship was a tragic teenage affectation, belief in magic, ghosts and monsters was inversely proportional to one's ignorance of the natural world, and mystics were more or less method actors who forgot they were playing a part—the humourlessness of the mystical experience itself the signature giveaway. I thought that the people who thought 'God' was not a noun but rather a verb should just look for a different word. And, my crucial mistake: I thought that the afterlife was for those who couldn't abide ultimatums.