

# NOW!

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# The secret life of Jus Mid-life prices

by Justin Coombs



It begins like this: I'm sitting in a car with three other blokes, heading towards the airport. It's a rare and special occasion, and we're very happy about the whole deal. Our long planned four-day escape to the beach is upon us, and we're supercharged with blokeness. We're bloking it up baby; so you'd better watch out. No messing now, here we come, get ready!

Such was my romantic outlook: the boys against the world, on our way to rip it up big time; show us the beers, and babes beware! Until, that is, 'Quickly' shouts from the driver's seat, "Okay fellas, now have we all got our phone chargers?". After the few moments it took me to realise he wasn't joking, the bottom dropped out of my youth. He didn't ask, "Who's got the Vodka?", "Where's my passport?" or "Did you see that handbrake turn?". No. As he cross-checked preparation for our totally off the wall boys weekend, the driver thought not of naughty boy's stuff and all things mischief. Rather, he thought of telecommunications. Even sadder than his question were our answers, in that "Yes thanks" we did indeed all have our phone chargers.

The beach house we were destined for belonged to Matt's mum; so on arrival at the city airport, we headed to the family home to get the keys. Did we wait outside in the car while he faced his Olds, cracking the top off a few stubbies, and talking rude

about his sister? Did we tell him to hurry up, to keep the chit-chat short and sweet so we can get down and party?

I think you can guess that we didn't do that, given where this story is going. No, we filed in quietly, in single order, and each gave mum a kiss on the cheek. We milled around in the kitchen, with the most polite body language four fat blokes can muster, and we talked and we smiled and we ate cakes. And do you know what? We LOVED it!

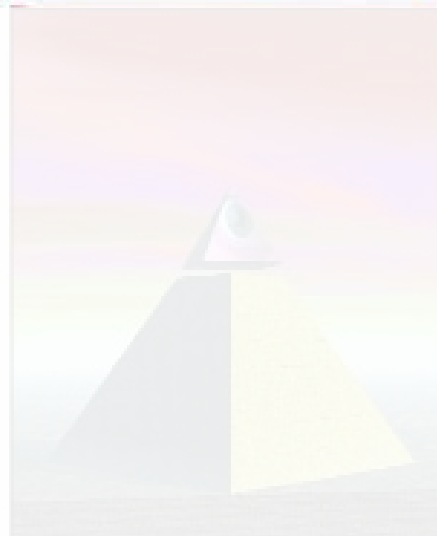
So, quite a nasty couple of hints towards age, I'm sure you'll agree? It got me thinking. I considered the now and I pondered the past, and I decided that I have to finally admit that I'm really no longer that young groovy thing I thought I was up until about eight days ago. The signs are there. Something's changed, and I'm wondering at what cost?

I got my head round the rapid depreciation of one's aesthetic-self years ago. So well adjusted am I to this item on the balance sheet, that I chuckled, completely naturally, when a work colleague saw a picture of me in this column, taken in 1997, and said "Wow! You look cool! Was that in the eighties?" I'll happily admit to you that I've got a few nose hairs that I have to trim regularly, and I'll happily admit that, in the throes of denial, I told the sexy chick in the chemist that the nose-hair trimmer I was buying was for my granddad. I'm at peace with

and believe in all that stuff.

However, my faith in and comfort with this natural progression is tested when I suddenly find myself making nibbles when I have parties, taking a day off work to do my filing and rushing home from the shops to enjoy an ornamental silk screen that I've bought for the dining room! What the bloody hell's all that about? Someone fill me in, please!

I didn't ask for or choose this path; so it must be an evolutionary process, happening of its own accord and in spite of me. In that case, there must be a benefit, right? That's what evolution is for! So we get better at stuff. So we improve. We needed to walk on land and breath air - so we grew little legs and closed our gills.



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We liked the look of the forbidden fruit - so we strengthened our spines, stood up, and grabbed it. Women didn't like being hit over the head with clubs - so they developed independence and invented feminism. Men didn't like doing hard sums - so they came up with circuit-board technology, and the calculator was born.

With such an impressive resume on so many fronts, I wondered how our development as a species could falter so badly in such a fundamental arena. Namely, after hundreds of thousands of years of 'man' as we know ourselves, it's still the case that, the older we get, the crapper we get, the less groovy, if you will, which surely flies in the face of everything we would choose for ourselves?

A week after I arrived safely and sensibly home from my 'mad' Boys' Weekend, I hit rock bottom in the profit and loss auditing of age. A new flat-mate was due to move in with me. So I spent an exciting weekend clearing my shit out of the study, in order that it would become a bedroom (I had a ball.....seriously!). In one of many fully indexed cardboard boxes I found a remote control fart machine, that I bought duty-free about six months ago, with foresight of fun and larks a'plenty. It was still sealed in its packaging, the batteries included were still not inserted. How's that for a loud and clear warning of an impending mid-life crisis?

But then something special happened, as it often does in my little world, and, as far

as my calculations compute, it balanced the books sufficiently. An ex-girlfriend of mine got in touch one morning to let me know she was off on her travels, for a number of years, and she wanted to say goodbye. We'd had a chequered past, and there was need for closure.

That very lunchtime I found myself darting in and out of shops on the main street, looking for a card on which to write the loveliest of farewells, and a present to take with her that would make her feel special. This took her by surprise, given the patchy terms under which we had parted, and she asked why I had done so.

"To make you happy", I offered.

"Well, you've succeeded", she replied. And right there and then I achieved my breakeven point with this age thing. I may be more porky than groovy, and I may be more boring than roaring, but at the ripe old age of what some call Dirty Thirty, my priority that night was ensuring my ex-love went on her way with optimal happiness, feeling good about herself and her life. A few years ago, I would simply have tried to shag her, and would probably have upset her in the process.

If that's the price of age, I'll take it!

*Justin Coombs grew up in South-east London, before relocating to Australia in 2000. He ripens with age, and dedicates this to Matt's mum, Diana, for her lovely cakes.*

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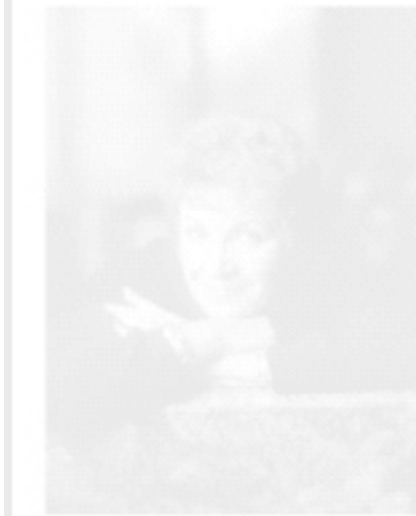
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The secret life of Jus

# Green eye for the great guy

JUSTIN COOMBS

I'm the first to admit I'm not a very good cook. In fact, I'm a bit of a cuisine cock-up, with a topping of ignorance. You're talking to the guy who cooked a chicken barbecue for the boys a few months ago, diligently following the easy-to-follow recipe book, which I thought was telling me to wrap the breasts up in lettuce leaves before putting them on the grill. At the time I did think it was a tad awkward trying to spear the lettuce with the toothpicks, given the propensity of lettuce to tear under such pressures – but I persevered. It wasn't until I had an audience of sniggering blokes watching me trying to cook chicken through wet, soggy, shredded lettuce that I realised my error. I had read the instructions and ingredients, without my glasses on (so as not to see the ham wrapped around the chicken), in conjunction with the big pretty picture on the facing page – in which the chicken was sitting on a juicy bed of lettuce. The ingredients referred to wrapping the chicken in prosciutto. I had spent ages

looking around Safeway for prosciutto lettuce, then gave up and took a punt on iceberg.

Whoops-a-daisy! There have been a number of similar gaffs, with similarly harsh audiences. Take my word for it.

But I've been practising hard of late, bless my cotton socks, and so it was that last Wednesday I found myself looking through my cupboards with the intention of cooking up a storm for me, myself and I. If you're a regular reader, you'll know that money has been tight, so the choices as I saw them were bare. I came up with a packet pasta which should serve two, and three leftover sausages that I intended to chop up and mix in. Yummy!

When Quicky called and said he was on his way over I was, as always, very happy about it. But when he answered 'Absolutely!' to my question 'You hungry?', it left me with a bit of a dilemma. Quicky is one of the few people I know who is bigger than me in both height and girth, and sits in a minority of one of those I know who can eat more than me. So my menu needed padding. The best I could do was packet mashed potato, which should serve two.

I totally understood when Quicky asked 'Can I please cook?' After all, if there's anything kitchen-related around these parts that's more common knowledge than my appalling abilities in this area, it's Quicky's God-given talents in the very same place. I humbly sat on the other side of my kitchen bench and watched him glean from my cupboards stuff that I didn't know what it was, stuff that I didn't know what to do with, and stuff that I would never have thought of putting with the stuff I was going to cook.

He put the unopened packet of mashed potato in the bin, then delicately danced like an angel for 25 minutes, adjusting knobs on my cooker that had dust gathered on the "zero" and juggling a myriad of goings-on and appliances, with precision and professionalism a-plenty. I looked on in awe and appreciation.

And just for a quick flash in time, perhaps no longer than it took Quicky to manually blend a divine pasta sauce, I looked on in something else too. Envy. For about half a glass of my sauvignon blanc there was a green mist in that kitchen, and it was nothing to do with the succulent

cabbage that was steaming away on the stove.

The jealously I experienced was not quite your hatred-fuelled, Hollywood blockbuster, and I did not wish death or misfortune to Quicky and his family. Neither did I feel like I wanted to replicate him with plastic surgery and gradually steal his life from under him. I did, however, get the shits for a bit. I wanted to be cooking like that, and looking so God-damn bloody good at it!

Of course, the result of Quicky's kitchen blessing was fabulous, and by the time I was stuffing it down my face, the green mist had long since evaporated at the return of awe and appreciation. But since then I have been thinking about that certain monster, which I like not to believe in anymore, and its continued ability to visit me in spite of what I consider to be my very balanced personality.

I have lots of friends, family and acquaintances who will testify to me being a "great guy". I think I am a "great guy" largely due to the beauty of wisdom that

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comes to most of us with age. Lots and lots of experiences and situations, from which I try hard to learn lessons from and apply in the way I think and conduct myself. I'm comfortable with myself at this stage. I like the way I do things. I'm happy enough with me that I don't really care if you have more money or a faster car. I'm genuinely happy from the bottom of heart when any good stuff or luck comes your way. If you're a natural entertainer and always enjoy your jokes. If you're better than me at badminton, I'll shake your hand submissively and look forward to having a crack at you next time. If you have a good idea, I'll mean it when I say 'Good idea man!'

So, Green-Eyed Monster, where do you get off messing with me and my very Zen approach? I thought I was done with my belief in you! Haven't you got kids without a Play Station to visit? Or maybe teenagers still clinging to virginity? And I'm sure there's plenty of deranged corporate victims who didn't get the deal or the promotion to keep you busy? So leave me alone!

Thankfully it doesn't visit often. The very next day, as I was sitting watching the first cut of a fantastic feature film that my best friends have produced and directed (it will be huge and they will be rich), eating Quicky's tremendous talent in tacos, the monster was nowhere to be seen. But I did bounce the subject of its existence off a few

people who, like me, should know better than to entertain it.

The initial feedback was predictable, in that any jealousy they experience is "in a good way". Rather nauseatingly, wisdom and love magically combine to ensure any green-eyed visions these good people feel are instantly coupled with feelings of best wishes and support. To quote one example: 'I was soooo jealous that my sister had that car ... but I was happy for her ... you know? I was happy to share the experience with her'. However, when pushed, a few honest souls revealed that it's not just me who the monster still visits on occasion.

I asked the sister who had the sister with the nice car: 'Yes, but do you have maybe just the slightest, most occasional moments, perhaps just an instant, where your envy's left you feeling less than charitable? You know, where you might have felt like growling a bit?' The answer was a careful "yes", however she couldn't leave it there. Like most of us, this girl considers the Green-Eyed Monster a nasty, unhealthy, destructive ingredient in our lives, but, also like most of us I'm sure, just could not leave a sentence ending with confirmation that she falls victim to it. Her further qualifications gave me an answer that I didn't realise I was looking for. This is what she said:

'But you know Justin, jealousy is a natural thing in our lives. It's human nature. It's how we deal with it that makes the difference.'

Lateral thinking is something else I'm not always good at, and when sister who had the sister with the nice car said this,

my mind whispered a kind of embarrassed "Eureka!", like the one you might mention under your breath when someone shows you a really easy way to do something, the hard way with which you've been labouring for a decade. Of course! Why didn't I think of that?!

A quick recap of the monster's visits I could remember satisfied me that I was dealing with it quite well. Putting up a good fight, if you will. On the most recent occasion, had I lost the battle, then I would have daydreamed about something like driving Quicky's own expertly-handled chopping knife deep into his neck ... or at the very least lying to him that the sausages were slightly under-done, perhaps said with a screwed up, this-tastes-like-plastic look on my face. But as it was, I somehow managed to pull my happy thoughts back from the monster's dastardly clutches, then I kicked it up the bum and sent it back to its lair.

I scoffed earlier, but I think wisdom and love really do give you strength. If you believe in them.

JUSTIN COOMBS GREW UP IN SOUTH EAST LONDON, BEFORE RELOCATING TO AUSTRALIA IN 2000. HE BELIEVES IN MONSTERS AND HAPPY ENDINGS. HIS THANKS TO TONI FOR HER WISDOM, AND TO QUICKY FOR HIS DINNERS.

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# The secret life of Jus To the power of Mum

by Justin Coombs

If different feelings had weight and substance, and had to be carried with us during the times at which we felt them, I would have been way over my luggage limit as I checked in for my flight to the UK. Into the very mixed bag went excitement about seeing my friends and family again, sadness that I didn't see them more often, fond memories of my very dear, recently late mum and dad, mourning for their absence in my world, worries about terrorism and concerns about SARS – all nicely wrapped up in the knowledge that I completely couldn't afford to go in the first place.

I attended the wedding of one of my friends, who's been known to me and in my heart for the best part of 15 years. Everyone, myself included, had a fantastic time, but if I'm being honest, I wasn't a very happy man while visiting my pommy roots. Being made a fuss of by people who love you is priceless. However, I found that after three years I didn't really belong any more – a totally unavoidable feeling, and I found hard to bear the realisation that the moment I was unable to sit at my mum's kitchen table, and talk about stuff with her over a cup of tea, was the moment this place ceased to be my home.

Practically everyone I know lives within an immediate radius of what used to be my family home, and practically everyone I know used my very liberal, mum-run family home for hanging out during that awkward time between failing exams and being allowed into pubs. As a result they knew and loved my mum very much, they regarded her and me as a unit, and I just kept seeing her in their eyes. The fact that to go anywhere I had to drive past the old place certainly did not help matters.

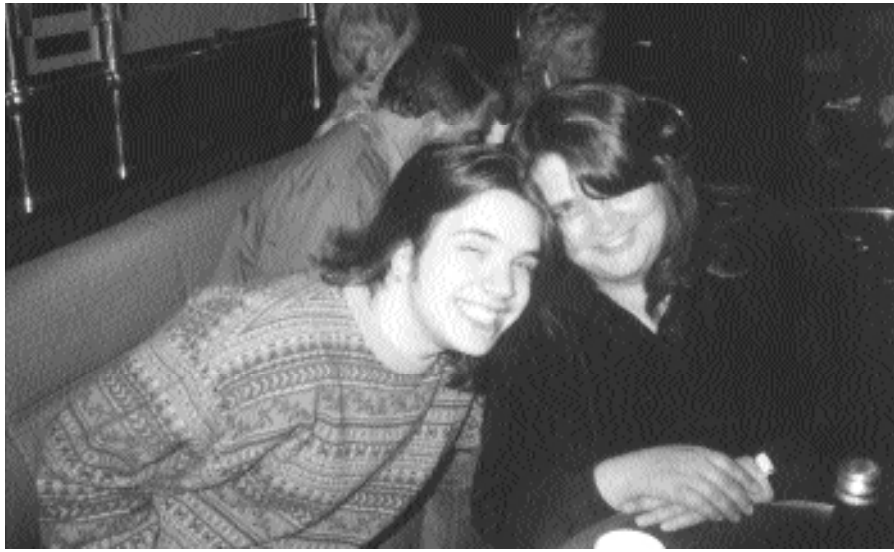
Frankly I was pleased that financial limitations and the impending holiday of my boss meant that I wouldn't be hanging around in London when Mother's Day arrived. Instead I was sleeping and sooking away jet-lag, back in Australia, waiting to see how I felt, knowing that I would spend the day alone while my buddies had dinner and drinks with their mums.

I was pretty un-fazed during my waking hours, but after I'd collapsed in a delirious heap with my airline "breakfast" still repeating on me, I'm pretty sure my mum chose this Mother's Day to come to me for the second time. The first time was in a dream I had just before I originally left the UK. She sat on a chair by the side of my bed, looking all 70s and gorgeous, and we just chatted and laughed like old friends for ages. The first thing I did when I woke up was reach across to grab her hand, and when my hand didn't stop until it touched carpet, I sat up to see where she'd gone.

The second time was a week ago, the third Mother's Day since she left and the first Mother's Day on which I'd felt relatively adjusted to the situation. This is what happened:

*I'm back at the family home with Mum and Pops, in the deepest darkest South-East London suburbs. Somehow I'm aware of a blue van parked at the kerbside on the other side of our block. A dodgy looking geezer dressed in tradesman's overalls has a manhole cover off and is disappearing down it at regular intervals.*

*In my head in my dream I'm feeling what feels to be about ten years old, and I'm wandering around the house amusing myself. Then I catch him. The bastard! The dodgy tradesman is*



Me and Mum - it wasn't always just tea we drank together

*appearing through the floor in a room in our house that I don't recognise and stealing stuff, taking it back into the floor and up through the manhole cover across the block, loading into his van.*

*I find Mum and Pops are sitting together watching TV (John McEnroe playing Jimmy Connors at Wimbledon). When I tell them about the thief I've discovered, they both look down on me with the kind of love that parents put out to their ten-year-old child – and both respectfully tell me I'm full of shit. Then I'm out by the van jumping, waving my arms and screaming at the man loading his van with our stuff, but of course he can't hear or just ignores me.*

*Suddenly I'm in the kitchen and Mum and Pops are a distant memory in my mind. It feels deserted in here, with the exception of the huge spider crawling across its web of thick white rope towards me. The sticky rope has me in its clutches and I can't move. As the spider crawls towards me I can see its legs and tentacle things are made of the same white rope as the web – its big round body is a shining red ruby stone, which looks very much like a ring my mum used to have in her jewellery box. I hear my mum whispering to me, reminding me not to be afraid of spiders. As she gives this reassurance, the beastly critter crawls*



Damaged? By these two? You've got to be kidding!

*harmlessly in front of my face, then away from me along its web into the distance of the dining room.*

I verbalised the dream to myself as soon as I woke, then sought the opinion of a respected interpreter and friend of this magazine. This is what she told me:

*The dream is set "back home", the place of my early childhood. Childhood is when most emotional damage is done and most strengths and qualities are shaped. So I have returned to the time when there was a degree of wounding and establishing of beliefs (often quite sub-consciously.....such as taking on the beliefs of parents, teachers and peers, like osmosis).*

*The dodgy geezer is outside the comfort and security of my home, but is breaking into and taking from it – he is stealing my innocence. My parents tell me they don't believe this, are unaware, which suggests emotional damage done to me by them without their knowing, in ignorance. I've returned to the time and place where things like confidence, self worth, self deservability and self esteem may have been taken.*

*The "wounding" done to me as a child provided me with the opportunity to heal myself and grow stronger and wiser.....indicated by*



Thinking.....probably about someone else's problems

*the fact that the van in which my stuff was being stored was blue, the colour of healing.*

*This daunting release of suppressed feelings was represented by the scary spider. Me stuck in the web was me stuck in my childhood conditioning and influences, and my mum came to me in Spirit, reminding me not to be afraid, helping me along to release them.*

I love the bit about Mum coming in Spirit to help me deal with stuff, although it's not quite as cosy as tea at the kitchen table. I dislike very much the idea that my parents caused me damage, albeit unwillingly, when I was younger, but I suppose part of the wisdom that comes with age is acceptance of things we don't like.

As to what I believe, I believe in what I feel, and I feel she is with me and talks to me occasionally. In reply to any damage she may have caused me by being human, I recall the time my friend bent my ear for an entire evening about how wonderful my mum was. My friend had spent the last week hiding out at our house Monday to Friday, while letting her parents think she was busy at work at the job she'd been sacked from. Her description, following six glasses of Savignon Blanc, was thus:

*"You know Justin, your mum, she's like, a proper mum, do you know what I mean? I mean, like, she's like mum-times-mum, or mum-squared. Do you know what I mean? She's like mum-to-the-power-of-mum".*

*Justin Coombs grew up in South-East London, relocating to Australia in 2000. He loves his mum.*

*Thanks to Jo Buchanan for her help with the dream interpretation in this article.*



## JUSTIN COOMBS

In keeping true with the trendy style of sequel, where what happened before gets told after, I'll tell you now about the first occasion that Jesus touched my life. We move back in time from my independent stomp across the wilds of tropical sub-continent, to the era in which my overseas travel extended to school journeys and two-week seaside packages with the parents.

I'm on holiday with my mum and dad and my best mate Danny, staying in a frightful concrete labyrinth on an unfortunate stretch of Spanish coast that's overrun by fat, drunk, bright red English blokes looking for a rumble or a root. Danny and I had very recently discovered the beauty of blind drunkenness; so we took to escaping mum and dad in the evenings and loading ourselves with beer.

At a squeaky clean 15 years old in a country which respects and cares for its kids like no other I've ever seen, it was only the English pubs that would serve us. After a few days testing the market, we favoured one particular establishment, named, imaginatively, 'The Queen Vic'.

Entertainment staff at the The Queen Vic – two alcoholic early-twenties Scottish girls, working the whole summer, waiting for their life to take shape – kept its patrons busy by bullying them up to the dance floor, insisting that they take part in choreographed clapping and shouting dances to such classics as 'Come on Eileen' and 'YMCA'. These days I would exhale a snobby scoff at the thought of such activities, but at the time it was a sure-fire way to get the chicks that were our age away from the table at which their mums and dads were sitting.

We got nowhere with these young girls of course, their parents being omnipresent and on the ball, but I did manage to attract the attention of someone else. She was dancing in the line behind me, following my moves to "American Pie" and pinching my bum intermittently. When I turned around to follow up this lead I noted a boy about my age next to her, eyeing me suspiciously. I thought at first I was cutting his lunch, but after a quick chat Marie introduced me to him. Stephen was her son!

Huge age differences didn't seem to bother Marie – and Stephen seemed quite at peace with his single mum's behaviour – so we pashed and copped feels with

complete abandon, in between silly dances, over the next few nights. Even though we did not "go all the way", the maturity and skill in her intimacy took me to a whole new world, where globules of saliva were not left on chins, naughty bits were touched, not fumbled, and rude expressions like the "f" and "c" word were whispered in an acceptable, romantically endearing context. I quickly became besotted, and was absolutely devastated when it was time for her to go home. On her last night, after our last pash, she asked me if she could put me in her suitcase and take me home with her. I swooned, and seriously considered it, but in the end made do with her phone number.

On my return to the UK, we quickly arranged my visit to her house for a weekend in the country. There was some initial awkwardness from both parties. Mine from performance anxiety at the thought of having sex with a grown-up, hers from guilt at the thought of having sex with a boy who's mum shared her age bracket. But we overcame these obstacles and settled into four frisky years of my lying to my parents and whoever I was seeing at the time, disappearing to Marie's for a very intense, very naughty and, as far as I was concerned, a very educational and inspirational weekend. The womanly, seductive, 36-year-old Marie was the third person I'd ever slept with, and my first romantic cliché. She was, quite literally, twice my age. Old enough to be my mum, a cradle-snatcher, and so on. It was illicit. It was a lesson. It was lovely.

On average we saw each other about four or five times a year, and developed a very strong, close relationship. We were each other's little secret, and very much enjoyed the exclusivity when we locked the doors and shut out the world on our two or three day meets. If mobile phones had been around at that time, we would have turned them off.

It may not have been quite love, but whatever we had it was enough to make me feel pretty strange when, two months after our last weekend together, Marie told me on the phone she was now a 'born-again' Christian. She'd met some person who had told her a few things and now she was a member of this cult-y church, and completely unable to speak more than a few sentences without ending back at a reference to God saving her life.

Fifteen minutes of nauseating preaching, during which I squeezed about 20 words

into the conversation (all of which were in an attempt to steer it towards a close), was enough for me to know I would not be pursuing another weekend. But Marie blew me out before I had the chance to voice my change of heart. Apparently the four years we had been having this affair, along with the rest of Marie's deeply regretted sinful life up until about six weeks ago, was a big, blasphemous mistake. She was devoted to God and Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. She would be happy to see me should I visit, but she really was quite busy repenting and it might be difficult for her to find time. I asked how Stephen felt about his mum's new passion, and she said the last time she'd seen him he'd been a little upset ... but they hadn't talked since she'd kicked him out of the house, her new friends having convinced her his sinful behaviour was too much for her to bear under her roof. Marie went nuts, and it was the last time that she and I spoke.

I still get slightly miffed when I recall that Jesus Christ convinced Marie not to have sex with me any more, but I'm not bearing any grudges. After all, one could argue that deviation from the path of casual sex with a boy half her age could have been a good thing for Marie. However, there is certainly a question mark over the eviction of one's son from your house because he drinks beer and doesn't pray. This is just one of a number of events I've witnessed first-hand that makes me wonder about God (and equivalents) in general. Is it just my skewed perception, or do a scary number of people behave very, very strangely as a direct result of their belief in Him?

I talk not of those who feel suppressed and react as they see fit, but of those who give all their money to someone who is clearly a con-man. I talk of those who send their daughter to be exorcised when she falls pregnant. I talk of those who come to my door and tell me I'm nothing more than a sin on legs.

I have my own beliefs that enrich my life as I follow them, and I applaud anyone who does the same – so long as their behaviour expresses the right of their fellow humans to make their own decisions and be treated with respect. If your God asks that you worship, amongst whatever else, common sense and compassion, then I have no problem. However, I need explaining to me the requirements to stop having sex, to give you money, to regret my life, and to listen to you give your

uninvited views on my doorstep. I also can't grasp why a teenage girl shouldn't be allowed to abort a two-week-old collection of cells which will evolve into a baby that she is unwilling to have and unable to provide a good life for, or why I should let my son grow up thinking he'll spend an eternity in a fiery cave, being poked by Beelzebub with a hot fork, should he commit the malevolent sin of masturbation.

I don't have anything else to say if you're one of these people (apart from "stay out of my face!"). After all, you've probably stopped reading by now, perhaps to damn me in prayer or burn my photo on the street. If there is any conclusion to draw, then it's to share with those like me, who feel in danger of losing faith sometimes, when it dawns on us how many nutters there are in the world. I have two bits of wisdom, both of which take the form of gentle reminders.

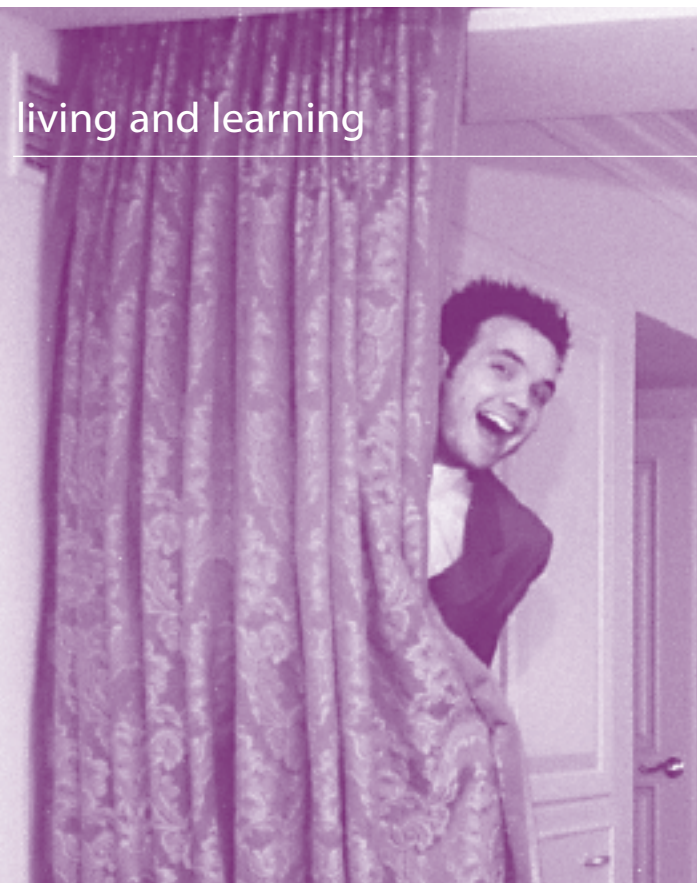
Marie and I promised we would always be best friends, even when we had both found more feasible, socially-acceptable partners. I broke this promise without a second thought when she told me she had chosen God for her partner, and, to be morbid for a bit, I still wonder today whether she ended up okay. I claimed to care about her, but didn't think to check out these people at the church, or at the very least keep in touch to some degree to make sure she hadn't been harmed or tricked into giving her house away or something.

So Lesson One, Verse One, from the Book of Justin, is:

Recall thee, that with our word given, and with our acceptance unto others and their opinions, we make ourselves. This is who we are, and we are this person. In all circumstance. Recall thee this, even when thee finds ridiculous religiousness.

And Lesson One, Verse Two, is:  
Look thee, upon those who preach intrusive opinion and aggressive fundamentalism. Look thee upon those people, and remember you can stop listening.

*JUSTIN COOMBS GREW UP IN SOUTH EAST LONDON, BEFORE RELOCATING TO AUSTRALIA IN 2000. HE'S READING A BOOK AT THE MOMENT WHICH CLAIMS JESUS CHRIST WAS A REAL MAN, WHO HAD KIDS WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND AND THEREFORE HAS REAL DESCENDANTS. SHOULD THIS BE TRUE, JUSTIN WOULD LIKE TO APOLOGISE TO THESE DESCENDANTS FOR ANY OFFENSE CAUSED IN THE DELIBERATIONS OF THIS ARTICLE.*



The secret life of Jus

# The smug bug

## JUSTIN COOMBS

That's better! I feel like a proper writer now. I'm unemployed, unhealthy and hungover. At the time of writing my complexion has tones of ashtray and my personal hygiene is questionable to say the least. The romantic vision of one of my few ambitions is finally fully complete. I intend to look and feel sexy again soon of course, and I suppose I will look for another job at some point, but as I'm sitting here in my "study" (I've never had one of those before!), looking at the sun go down over the bay and the cityscape, it's hard not to feel happy that my life seems to be progressing in directions of which I approve. With my disheveled, spectacled hunch over a screen, I just reminded myself of so many writers from so many predictable movies, and I felt like yelling a line from such a film. Something like, "SEE MUM, I MADE IT!"

And then I felt like a terribly smug bastard. If my life were a movie, I would then have sauntered out to the huge balcony with my martini and wondered what the poor people were doing. I've had this nasty smug-bug a couple of times over recent months, chuckling away with my similarly successful, stupendously fortunate Pommie flat mate about how great our new lives are on the other side of the world, and I need your help to bring me down a few pegs.

Of course being the modicum of tact and diplomacy means that I'm very good at keeping my actual conversations humble, but it's what I'm thinking that's giving me the guilts. Apart from being very lovely and very cuddly, my best friend Big Dom is very wise, and I'll never forget what he said to me in the company canteen some 14 years ago, when I was being nosy and asked what of his ambitions. "Progression in all things", was his carefully considered response, and in the years since, I've seen

him systematically achieve his perception of what that is. I've never seen him scoff as his WRX takes the lead off the lights, and I've never heard him verbalise the fact that he earns more than any of us for doing not much at all, getting home before sundown everyday to his beautiful wife and child in his beautiful house. But what is he thinking? Is he sitting on his new decking back there in London feeling smug too? And if he is, is it allowed? Is it okay to feel these things, as long as we don't say them to anyone that might be offended?

I haven't got any answers this time. No epiphanies. All I know is my guilt, which I'm feeling in spite of the fact I always put coins in boxes and I never count my chickens. I've discussed the issue before with my similarly successful, stupendously fortunate Pommie flat mate, and he seems to think it's ok in moderation, preferring to keep his Catholic guilt strictly to his professional life only. However, he's the sort of bloke who makes sure any stranger he may happen to speak to for longer than a few seconds is fully aware that he did a personal best in his triathlon this morning, using his new bike, so I'm not convinced he's the best person to ask.

Does it mean I am not yet fully developed as a "good person", because I am unable to realise my "good life" without being bugged by smug? Am I afflicted? Or do all of you who are lucky enough to have, or to be, something nice, get secretly self-righteous about how great you are? Seriously, I want to know.

While you ponder that, I must confess that I believe I have a bit of a complex about this issue. So maybe all I need to do is relax? I hear my similarly successful, stupendously fortunate Pommie flat mate on the phone to home, back in shitty, drizzly London, waxing lyrical about how great the sunset looked as he screamed down Beach Road in his BMW soft top, big-

boobed blonde by his side. When you break it down he's only telling people that love him what he's been up to, but I just cringe like crazy. When my boys ask how Australia is treating me, I think of the astounding sunsets, the groovy job, the kick-arse pad, the sexy chicks, the great coast of living, the yummy food, etc., and I say, "Yeah it's not bad thanks". I just think of them freezing to death, waiting for packed out, pissy-smelling trains that will never arrive, and this black death of guilt washes through me. I feel that by going into any detail I'd just be rubbing their beautiful faces in it.

However, like I said, I can keep conversation as humble as I like, but there's no escaping what I feel. And if I accept that I feel smug from time to time, this is a BIG problem for me. In my world smug people are right up there on my top five Things That Make My Blood Boil list, along with those flies that aim for your eyes and wind that keeps blowing your newspaper shut. Not happy. It means I'm like that annoyingly smooth spunky hunk in that new show Las Vegas, who, in the title credits, is driving down the strip in his fast car, taking in the sights, his arrogant eyes and smarmy smile letting you know he's just as good as it gets and he owns this town. Grrrrr!

Do I have a point, or am I being too hard on myself? Am I confusing smugness with a perfectly acceptable feeling of satisfaction with my life, or am I slowly turning into my own worst nightmare? Am I allowed to have these pangs of pre-occupation with my own position, or is my guilt well-placed?

I've had a break between what you've read so far and, in this bit, I wanted to try and answer my own questions. I went to the ground floor apartment directly below our huge balcony, where the best friend of mine I told you about last month has just moved in (meaning that we basically run a

two-storey mansion between us!). I sat by the 'water-falled', wave-machined pool, listening to the birds tweeting in the expanse of private foliage and drinking my fine red wine, knowing that, even with my bad shoulder, I could throw an apple over the wall and it would land on a gorgeous beach. I tried very hard not to feel smug.

It was a pretty fruitless exercise, until someone remarked how bright the moon was. I looked up, and, as always, drifted away and started day-dreaming on the stars. Just staring and losing myself, thinking how freaky our existence is. I'm sure you know the kind of thought process I'm talking about, where you get as far as, "Wow, what's it all about?", then it all gets too heavy and too scary; so you look away.

I pondered creation for a good while, then gave up and looked away, drifting straight into a conversation. It was over an hour before I remembered I was writing this, at which time I made apologies and ran back upstairs (yes - chasing deadline again!). As I sat down again in my "study", it struck me that I'd also forgotten completely about my surroundings, my good fortune and, most importantly, my smug bug. After all my pains in worrying about my affliction, a quick dose of the stars, with their active ingredient of a picture much bigger than me, was all it took to clear me right up.

So if you think you might be suffering from the Smug Bug, and you feel like you want to cure it, just pick a clear night and look up. I'm not qualified to confirm or dismiss whether there'll be a God waiting to ease your pain, but there's definitely healing in the heavens.

JUSTIN COOMBS GREW UP IN SOUTH-EAST LONDON, BEFORE RELOCATING TO AUSTRALIA IN 2000. [HE IS NOT FEELING VERY SMUG ABOUT HIS INABILITY TO THINK OF A WITTY BIOGRAPHY HERE.]



The secret life of Jus

# Blokey bloke

## JUSTIN COOMBS

Until last week, the first and only hands-on experience I'd ever had on a building site came at the age of 15. Dad held a position that meant he shouted at people all day, drank cups of tea and smoked fags, having worked his way up the proverbial ladder too. He pulled a few strings my way to ensure I could earn some cash during the summer holiday, on a site in the city, under the charge of his mate Fat Bernie.

Fat Bernie was not alone in being surprised to see me at 10.18 sharp that Monday morning. As I stood at the door of the site office/portable cabin thingo, ten or so highly amused builders looked at me with tearful eyes and stifled guffaws. Fat Bernie's reaction was at the thinner end of the wedge - he looked solemn and remorseful. In addition to his new "labourer" for the next six weeks being exactly two hours and eighteen minutes late for work on his first day, my choice of wardrobe consisted of shiny black cowboy boots, immaculate stone-washed jeans (clearly brand new, with sewn-on, in-vogue motifs), and a perfectly pressed cream shirt (neatly tucked in). I'm sure my moussed mop of late eighties, post-new romantic hair-do, and my thick leather Michael Jackson belt (with silver dangly bits), only served to irritate poor Fat Bernie more. But, I was Roger's "Kid", as Dad used to call me, and as such Fat Bernie put the kid gloves on for me. I spent six weeks in the site office making tea, moving bits of paper around and eating Kit Kats, being paid as much as many of the grown ups working their arses off carrying bricks and stuff outside in the cold. Fat Bernie had someone put some boards over a water logged route to the port-a-loo when it rained hard one day (he never said it was for me, but I knew it was), and I was away by 3pm most afternoons. Fat Bernie even paid me for my sickies, which were numerous relative to the contract length.

Ironically enough this is anything but what my dad would have wanted for me. Fat Bernie didn't know that when not calling me "Kid", my dad called me a "fat poof" and would have quite liked me to be toughened up a bit. As it was, I sailed

through my time on the site without so much as a broken fingernail, and a year later left school sound in the knowledge that "building" is something that you have people do for you.

I think my dad eventually resigned himself to my lack of blokeyness. Even in later days, when I was drinking loads of beer and laughing with him down at the blokey pub, him safe now in the knowledge that I slept with girls, I still think I saw sadness behind his eyes. I knew nothing of hammers and nails, I didn't religiously watch any type of sport whenever it was aired, I had long girly hair and danced like a "fairy" at "poncey nightclubs". I also saw Mum's point of view on most of the domestic matters I was party to, and was far too animated in conversations with visiting girlfriends about stupid girl stuff.

I didn't give a damn, of course. I knew I was making all the right moves. I knew it was becoming cool amongst those in the know to be in touch with your feminine side, and it was serving me well. I liked nice clothes, pacifism, having fun, and easy jobs which required little work and no dirt. Dad was living in the past. I was Mr Tomorrow.

Thankfully, many of the frightful illusions of youth have left me over the years, but the lack of blokeyness has turned out to be part of me, rather than a fashion. My dad's long gone but there are other blokey-blokes (and girls who like blokey-blokes) in my life to scoff at my hair-do, my opinion, my mannerisms, and my ever-clean hands. So imagine how amused these people were to learn of the rather ironic predicament I faced last week. I was in between jobs with absolutely no money, on the day before rent day. The phone rings. A friend of a friend is building a house and needs labour help the very next day. Payment for this mission, should I choose to accept it, will cover my rent.

When I excused myself from a dinner at 9.30pm last Thursday night, explaining I had to be "on site" across town at 7.30am, I think I got one verbalised response of "Yeah right!!". The rest of them just laughed, and I normally would have done so too, but I was scared. Fat Bernie was not on this job. Squizzy was in charge, and apparently he was a bastard of a boss. The immense apprehension I suffered at

the thought of crossing this so sacred of lines ensured I achieved my first "first" that day; I bounced out of bed full of beans at 6am. I dressed as ready for dirt as I could, remembering Fat Bernie's face and the cowboy boots. As the car moved far too quickly towards its destination, I tried to chase thoughts of pillows and cups of tea with Bert Newton from my mind and think how the hell I was going to get through this day. Nine hours of shifting somebody else's shit, getting dirty and hurt. It went against everything I stand for, and I needed to summon up some motivation.

By the time the car pulled up outside the huge, cold wooden box that would eventually become a house, I'd brain-stormed a connection between the day's work ahead and my recent exercise campaign, that had been going quite well (i.e., I had been doing some). I told myself Squizzy was paying me to do a really strenuous, full day's workout, and therefore it was easy money, because I'd be exercising anyway if I wasn't at his silly house at this silly time in the morning. It was weak, but it was all I had. After a 17-second briefing on the hideous amount of work we had to do that day, I put my head down, switched off my brain and ran frantically around that site doing blokey stuff like I had A.D.D. or something.

And you know what? I LOVED it! Moving muck, sweeping muck, cleaning muck. Up ladder, down ladder, carrying ladder. Hammering nails, screwing screws, fitting fittings. Before I knew it, 4pm had arrived, Squizzy had given me a beer, more money than originally promised and an offer of more work next week. Apparently I did this blokey stuff quite well.

I'm sure the novelty of saying I'm "on the tools" to my mates will wear off, as will my tolerance of the 6am rise, but every day I arrive on that site will remind me just how easy it was to shake off a lifetime of denial. Not only did I face one of my ultimate demons, but my spirit somehow ensured I enjoyed it and did it well. Pretty cool, huh?

I don't know what the opposite cliché to turning in one's grave would be, but whatever it is, my dad will be doing it now.

JUSTIN COOMBS GREW UP IN SOUTH EAST LONDON, BEFORE RELOCATING TO AUSTRALIA IN 2000. HE'S ALL MAN.

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The secret life of Jus

# The rise and fall of Mr Spliff

## JUSTIN COOMBS

**Chapter 1 - The streets of South-East London (1986)**  
It's less than six months since I managed to do up my first pair of 30-inch-waist jeans, and realised I could now get in and out of my old pairs without undoing them at all. Not being a hugely fat loner bully anymore was very new to me. So, too, was being allowed to hang with the happening kids around the streets at night-time after the youth club had closed.

I was a bit naive for my 14 years, and had absolutely no idea what was going on when Gosnel and Micky-Lee said we were going to get some "puff". A rather nasty selection of bigger kids I recognised from my days at school on the estate met us on some dark corner and gave us a little bag of broken brown lumps of something. My mate gave them £7.50.

In a dark park 20 minutes later I had my first drag on a joint, then puked all down my new jeans.

**Chapter 2 - The bedroom bunch (1987)**  
It didn't take me long to work out that hanging around on street corners was not for me. So for that awkward time between failing exams and being allowed into pubs, some like-minded non-street urchins and I would hide in various bedrooms, drinking cheap potent shit and pretending we'd had sex. My one and only drug experience had remained just that until tonight, when Rhett arrived with some more puff. I didn't really fancy it because I didn't want to be sick again, but had some anyway with everyone else. We laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed. Instant giggles! Fantastic!

Later that night I puked in my bed.

**Chapter 3 - Dope doctorate (1987-1990)**  
The three years leading up to my 18th birthday are best described as a doctorate in smoking dope. A period of study, if you will, in which I and a quality field of eager students quickly took on board all there was to learn of this craft. With a hungry, increasing frequency, we'd sit on bedroom floors in circular workshop groups, every-

one rolling, comparing, discussing, giggling. Life was a mission to get stronger shit, roll longer joints and get really, really, really mashed.

Before you could say, 'Has anyone got any roach material?' or 'Pass me the pokey-downy', we'd gone from occasionally buying a little bit between five of us to buying our own big bits regularly. Joints were a rather cool accessory now, rather than an exclusive event that you felt lucky to be a part of.

As the '90s arrived I'd mastered my sport and I was loving it. I could roll a nice joint pretty much anywhere, be it sneakily under the table in McDonald's or on the back seat of a bumpy bus ride, and I could tell you all about availability and what prices you would reasonably expect to pay in any given pub. I had the skills, the tools and the knowledge. I knew my stuff and did my thing like a pro.

But then I met Daisy B, and I realised there was another world out there.

**Chapter 4 - Devilish Daisy B (1990-1994)**  
I have many reasons to thank this part-named former love of my life, all of which I'm sure would make a great story. For the purposes of this tale I must refer to the passion we shared in smoking pot, which brought us and held us together. More specifically, I must mention that she took me into her arms and across to the groovy side of town, where she lived with her '60s-chick mum and famed crusty brother in a metaphorical psychedelic bubble. Family and friends alike approved of anything on this side of the tracks, plus they had the money and the venues to enjoy it.

During a whirlwind of festivals, raves, pool parties, chill-outs and cabbage days, I saw in Daisy's eyes an appreciation and devotion to the smoke that simply had to be admired. She smoked joints where and whenever you were allowed to smoke cigarettes, and she smoked joints at many places and times you weren't. She was always smoking joints, from the moment her big blue eyes opened in the mornings, and she was the happiest and most at-peace chick I'd ever met in my life.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

## Chapter 6 - Mr Spliff goes Down Under (2000-2001)

I followed my darling fiancée, Renee, to live on fair Australian shores in 2000, with a bag of inheritance cash. I'd given myself a year off work to recover from untimely parental losses. My only goals in those 12 months were to get married and to get mashed.

Nobody called me Mr Spliff over here, but my excesses were quickly realised by new friends and my name became synonymous with the drug almost at once. However, this was a strange feeling. It no longer felt quite so cool, for I had not grown up with and shared experiences with these people. Dope had dulled but not quite lobotomised me at this point, and I saw straight away the sadness suggested by newcomers in your life championing your ability to smoke lots of joints in any given circumstance ("sad" as in pathetic, not tearful). As these new friends swapped stories and laughed about certain cringy drug credibilities, I had the first tinges of notions that my habit was quite ridiculous.

Still, there's nothing like the love of a good woman and a two-month-long honeymoon to make you file such self-assessment away for a while, and so it was that the wife and I headed to Cambodia for the experience of a lifetime in early 2001. All was beautiful and well until Renee unexpectedly had to return home after a month, at which time I was left with a non-changeable ticket and a month to kill by myself. I was getting by on the crap Cambodian twig grass so far, Renee keeping my hands full as she does, but once alone I was in need of a proper fix. I crossed the border into Thailand.

And there I rattled, from north to south,

**Chapter 5 - Successfully stoned (1994-2000)**  
Despite having a die-hard bunch of chronic dope smokers as best mates, doing their utmost to mask my rise to fame with their own excesses, it was clear that I had quite a unique habit by the time I arrived back from India in 1994. I was no longer with Daisy B, but I carried her values with me. My life was now segmented into opportunities to smoke joints, with rolling time incorporated into any schedule. I had developed complete apathy towards social attitudes, which, coupled with lack of UK police interest in possession, meant I could smoke pretty much anytime, anywhere.

I didn't care if people knew I was stoned. I thought it was funny. I felt lucky that I had this secret little ingredient to my days.

This stuff seemed to suit me, seemed to do me favours. Mr Spliff was my friend.

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beach to town, hotel to hut, all the while smoking myself into psychosis. I had no time for the majority of travelling wankers one finds in South East Asia, so I spent most of my time alone. Lots of time alone, during which I had plenty of opportunity to again consider the habit I'd taken Down Under and the awestruck manner in which it was viewed by these people who didn't know me. I considered my constant cough. I considered the vast amounts of cash I spent. I considered the fact that I wasn't giggling any more - rather, just sitting here worrying about it.

A few days before my flight back to Australia, I checked into a posh hotel in Bangkok to avoid the travelling wankers and clear my head for a bit. 'It's time to straighten up,' I thought. On my second morning the only other westerner in the breakfast room kept trying to catch my eye. He was milky white and looking a bit lost as he ate his cereal - he had obviously just arrived. Normally I'm a very helpful chap in such situations, but I was bit too self-absorbed and over it. So I studied my napkin instead of meeting his gaze. God bless him though, he came over to my table and pushed the issue.

He was Pete, from the UK. He had upped and left following a painful relationship break-up and the realisation that he lives in a go-nowhere shit-hole, and jumped on a plane by himself with a promise from his travel agent that the expensive hotel he was staying in was "where all the fun backpackers go". He'd been shafted, felt scared, and was a lovely guy. So I helped him by postponing my head-clearing and showing him the sights via a 17-hour drug binge.

We had a great deal of fun, until Pete excused himself from my room at about

2am the next morning, saying that he'd had enough. We swapped details, shook hands, he went to bed, and I smoked joints watching movies until 5am. It was around then that I started to feel a bit funny.

I got pains in my heart, pains in head, pains in my arms. I was sweaty and dizzy, and scared to stand up because I thought I would simply collapse and die. Waves of sick nausea and panic made me want to cry, and I nearly did when I found I couldn't use the phone to connect to Pete's room for help. 'Get out of the room. No-one will know you're dead in here,' I thought.

I stumbled out and down the corridor to the lift, taking deep breaths all the way, sharing the ride to another floor with smart businessmen, probably tut-tutting in Thai at the messed-up foreigner squeezing himself in the corner, eyes closed, wet, pretending he wasn't here. On finding Pete's room and waking him up, I explained that I thought I was dying. He led me down to the hotel reception area and got them to call a doctor.

After a good few hours sitting dazed on a comfy hotel sofa, following expensive and incomprehensible advice from a medical man, my heart slowed and my hands dried. I no longer thought I was going to die today, but I reckoned I had come close. 'Phew!' I thought. Later that day Pete waved me off in my airport taxi - I was on my way home to a new life with some good, clean living.

**Chapter 7 - Diagnosis (2001)**  
I returned to Australia and imparted my episode to those who loved me. None had any insight as to what might have happened. So I was left to suspect heart/brain/other important problems and

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I abstained from absolutely everything. I was a 100 per cent intoxication-free zone for two weeks following my return, and my wife and I rejoiced in my newfound freedom. Until one night at the movies, I treated myself to a Diet Coke, some popcorn and had another massive "attack". My wife took me home, sat me on the couch and asked me to explain what I was feeling. I trust her implicitly, so didn't question her resistance to calling an ambulance. Instead, as calmly as I could, I explained how I was dying.

'Jutty, you're having a bloody anxiety attack!' she replied.

Eureka!

**Chapter 8 – Research, development and training (2001-2004)**

It didn't take long to amass a multitude of scary facts about the mess marijuana can cause to your mind, neither did it take long in discussions with anyone who would listen to find a whole club of people who used to smoke but don't now, simply because it started to mess with their heads. For every one person I knew who had never smoked it, there were six or seven who used to and stopped of their own accord. From all walks of life I found heaps of people who had happily discarded the delicious habit that had been an adored foundation to my adult life so far. Weird!

I felt confident I would never return to my previous form, but I found it very difficult to let go entirely. Rather than ride the crest of that wave, I decided instead to

experiment by ducking my head back under the water occasionally, partaking in the odd social smoke with the few friends I had who still did that kind of thing. One joint may have been fine, but after a few tokes of number two or three I would feel the anxiety start to stretch and yawn in the back of head. Paranoia would poke at my perceptions. My hands would sweat and stick to the joint. That should be enough to scare me off, right?

**As these new friends swapped stories and laughed about certain cringy drug credibilities, I had the first tingles of notions that my habit was quite ridiculous**

Um, well, actually ... no! What happened instead is that I played a cunning little mind trick on myself, whereby my brazen, strong-minded smoking head would pep-talk me as the anxiety got ready to strike. 'Chill Coombsie, everything's cool, it's only a bit of anxiety, you're not going mad, it's just the grass. Relax!' And, magically, I would be fine. Check me out! I'd cracked it, and set about retraining myself in the ways of the weed.

**Chapter 9 – You silly boy, Mr Spliff (2004)**

I was quickly smoking again as usual, as if nothing had happened, with the exception now that every once in a while I would need to talk myself down from anxiety or paranoia, depending on my surroundings, my state of mind, and the number of joints I'd smoked and with which particular people. I thought I could handle this, and have done so pretty successfully (i.e. not gone mad) for the past three years, but one evening not long ago I realised the conversation that goes on in my head to talk down the anxiety had actually been going on for about half-an-hour. Two voices talking to each other in my head, in spite of me! One trying to mess me up, the other desperately clinging to my sanity. I'm sitting there anxious and paranoid about the increasing severity of my anxiety and paranoia, all while I'm in the company of dear friends, smoking something that's supposed to make me giggle!

**Chapter 10 – Goodbye, Mr Spliff (2004)**

Mr Spliff died that night. The bad voice lost the battle. I woke bright and strong, and I didn't want a joint. I didn't have one all day, or the day after that. There was no longer a need for weed. It was a nicely strange feeling, as if I was missing a very painful limb – instant, blissful relief, with a slight concern on a more global scale about how I might cope in the future.

So far the future is looking very bright,

touch wood. Practically everybody who's seen me since Mr Spliff left me has said, with various expressions, how good I'm looking. I'm wearing jeans I haven't been able to put on since before Christmas. I'm no longer fazing out halfway through conversations with friends who I love and would hate to be rude to. I've actually got around to doing more work for myself than would be contractually required by an employer who puts money in my account every month (and for the first time I don't have one; so the timing is quite beautiful).

I've had a puff here and there since. I'd never lie to you. So in order to qualify the magnitude of the event, I can tell you that in the last seven days I've smoked about seven per cent of the norm. I can also tell you with my hand on my much more relaxed heart that of that seven per cent, I've enjoyed about 10 per cent. I can also tell you I feel better and more alive than I can remember this side of 16.

So maybe Mr Spliff is not quite dead, but take it from me he's on his very last legs. And I don't care. He's not my friend any more.

*JUSTIN COOMBS GREW UP IN SOUTH EAST LONDON, BEFORE RELOCATING TO AUSTRALIA IN 2000. "MR SPLIFF" IS A NICKNAME ASSIGNED TO THE AUTHOR BY AN ASSOCIATE KNOWN TO HIM. ANY SIMILARITY TO ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL AND UNINTENTIONAL.*



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