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Infinite Regress: Metafictional Memoir

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters
in
English
at Massey University, Manawatu,
New Zealand.

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2011

Abstract

Writers like James Frey, author of the controversial work *A Million Little Pieces*, have shown aspiring memoirists the negative consequences of deliberately fabricating portions of a memoir. The question memoir writers now face: how much can an author add to or omit from a memoir before it risks betraying the reader's trust in the author, which is essential to the proper functioning of memoir as a genre?

I discovered I would be unable to produce a coherent or truthful memoir without fictionalising portions of it in a manner that could have subjected me to the same criticisms Frey faced. Because I did not want to produce a wholly fictional work but felt unable to reveal certain aspects of my true life in a straightforward memoir format, I instead made the problem of producing a truthful memoir the central focus of my work.

My novella, *Infinite Regress*, uses metafiction to subvert the genre of memoir as an attempt to work around this issue of truthful self-representation. The analysis following *Infinite Regress* examines the characteristics of memoir as a genre, how reader response to memoirs hinges on readers being able to trust the memoirist, and the consequences of a memoirist breaking that trust. I then examine metafiction as a possible method of side-stepping the issue of truth in memoir; through use of metafiction, an author can deliberately draw a reader's attention to the problematic nature of truth in *any* narrative.

Finally, I demonstrate how metafiction does not ultimately represent a *solution* to the problem of truthful self-representation, and I determine that writing a memoir in a metafictional mode may only be preferable to not writing a memoir at all.

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INFINITE REGRESS

CHRIS RAWSON

DISCLAIMER

Just like Moses, the story of my exodus begins with a Bush.

Chris Rawson typed those words, and some indeterminate period of time later, you've read them.

Such clever wordplay, he thought, *with a bonus classical/Biblical allusion to win over the intellectuals*. He sat in front of his computer's screen and laughed out loud.

The line was so monstrously clever that Chris Rawson had to put it on Facebook,¹ Twitter,² and other online portals where he lived his virtual life. "This will be the first line of my Master's thesis," he typed. On Facebook, people "liked" it. On Twitter, the line got "re-tweeted". Elsewhere, digital people assured him (or his pseudonymic avatars) that it was, indeed, a funny line.

Chris Rawson wrote the story which follows. He is its omniscient third-person narrator, its introspective first-person narrator. He is the plot's protagonist, and he is also its chief antagonist. In this world, everyone is Chris Rawson with a slightly different face. It is a tale told by an egomaniac, a man who has no problem admitting that he believes he is at the centre of the Universe because, in scientific terms, it's literally true.³

Why is Chris Rawson telling you this now? To put it less pretentiously, why am I? It's called fair warning. If you're going to spend time immersed in the sea of words which follows, I thought you should know who you're dealing with before getting your feet wet.

¹ A social networking site on the Internet, and one of the most popular online destinations from 2007 - 201x. Now defunct.

² A "microblogging" site on the Internet, widely popular from 2009 - 201x. Now defunct.

³ For any observer at any location in the cosmos, the distance between the observer's retina (or equivalent) and the edge of the *observable* Universe is a comoving distance of approximately 14 billion parsecs (at time of writing). Any individual observer is therefore located at the central point of his/her/its observable Universe, a sphere with a diameter of 28 billion parsecs. During the epoch in which this was written, the observable Universe's central point was located in the lounge of a house on the corner of Ruahine and Luton streets in Hokowhitu, Palmerston North, New Zealand, when the observer in question is identified as Chris Rawson. Your observable Universe has its central point in a different location, except in the highly unlikely event that you are sitting in my lounge as you read this.

The most important thing to get out of the way: Chris Rawson is a con artist, though he prefers con *artiste*. But he's not the ho-hum everyday variety of confidence trickster, like the guys who go after old ladies' pension cheques or the Nigerian spammers who clog up everybody's e-mail inboxes. Chris Rawson gets his jolliest jollies only when he manages to hustle otherwise highly intelligent marks.

It's not as though he goes out of his way to hide his dishonesty. If you could see his Facebook profile,⁴ you'd find three quotes:

1. Your mom (verb phrase).⁵
2. I'm a Taoist, but not a very good one. For example, based purely on statistical probability, I probably want to kill you.
3. Truth is merely fiction stripped of all imagination.

These last two should be big warning signs. They depict two personality quirks common to the fraudster: misanthropy, and a delight in the art of the lie. It's no surprise Rawson became drawn toward creative writing; aside from sex, what more trusting, vulnerable act is there compared to what you're doing right now?⁶

This swindler, this cheat, this *bamboozler* has made a habit of surrounding himself with highly intelligent, driven people. All of his closest friends marks have genius-level IQs, but none of them suspect Chris Rawson for what he really is. He's so talented at masking his true self that he's even got animals fooled; you might expect dogs or cats to be able to sniff out his

⁴ You can't, and you never will.

⁵ This is the linguistic root of all "yo mamma" jokes. I used to feel self-conscious about such "lowbrow" humour, but it turns out even Shakespeare wasn't above a good yo mamma joke:

Painter: Y'are a dog.

Apemantus: Thy mother's of my generation. What's she, if I be a dog? — *Timon of Athens* I.i

Demetrius: Villain, what hast thou done?

Aaron: That which thou canst not undo.

Chiron: Thou hast undone our mother.

Aaron: Villain, I have done thy mother. — *Titus Andronicus* IV.ii

⁶ *I'm inside your head*. Think about what that implies for a minute.

true nature, but they flock to his banner with every bit as much enthusiasm as their bipedal counterparts.

Now that I've told you all this, will you read what follows any differently? Will you question the "truth" as it's presented here, or will you fall for the con too? Maybe this warning will ultimately prove counterproductive. After *telling* you everything Rawson says is a lie, you might shrug and say, "Well, at least he admits it. That's refreshing."

Chris Rawson is such a tremendous master of mendacity that only one person has ever managed to see past his carefully constructed façade and uncover the glistening evil that lies within him. This is not that person's story.⁷

⁷ Yes it is. Obliquely.

EVERYTHING I SAY IS A LIE.

-CLASSIC PARADOX

It's January 2010 when, as part of his Master's thesis, Chris Rawson writes his *Sprawling Immigrant Narrative*, the thrilling tale of his expatriation to New Zealand. He has two reasons for doing so. This is the reason he gave to Massey University months earlier:

My thesis will be a primarily creatively-focused endeavour examining the experience of immigrating to this country. The creative portion will be a fictionalised narrative that will draw very heavily on my own experiences in immigrating here from the United States. The research portion of the paper will likely be an analysis of the "immigrant experience" subsection of literature, where a lot of focus has been on adapting to a country where the culture, language, and even the colour of your skin is different entirely from those who surround you in your new country.

The difference for my "immigrant experience" is that I'm perfectly capable of blending in here — until I speak, or until I become baffled by one cultural difference or another and have to have it explained to me. I don't have to deal with racism, and I don't have any problems understanding or being understood (apart from occasional issues with accents), but a lot of the things typically experienced by other immigrants are still present — feeling a part of and yet apart from your new home, nostalgia for the old home, occasionally wondering if coming here was such a good idea after all, and deciding which parts of your old culture to sublimate and how much you want to assimilate into the new culture.

I intend to demonstrate with this thesis that there is room in the immigrant experience literary subgenre for another type of narrative, one which shows that the experience of moving from one Western nation to another can in many ways be just as bewildering, challenging, and rewarding as immigrating from a non-Western to a Western nation.

The second (real) reason he's writing? There's nothing an egomaniac loves better than talking about himself. He loves talking about himself so much that he finds it impossible to write a fictionalised version of events without getting his own story out of the way first, and this is the kind of stuff he writes:

Just like Moses, the story of my exodus starts with a Bush.⁸

I started out the millennium with a fairly conservative mindset, one of the last vestiges of the personality changes I'd had forced upon me by three years, five months, and thirteen days of service in the US Navy. I despised Clinton, who in my youth seemed as though he was better suited to selling used cars than holding the reins of the world's most powerful nation. The three-month catastrophe following the 2000 election saw me, to my subsequent chagrin, rooting for Bush and calling Gore a sore loser. But in Bush's first few months in office, his biggest accomplishments were taking six months of vacations at his Texas ranch and almost starting World War III with China by trying to act like Taiwan's protective older brother. It didn't take long for him to erode any scant goodwill I may have felt toward him.

Then, one September morning, I woke up at 6:30 in the morning for no apparent reason, stumbled into the living room, turned on the TV, and watched history fall down around my ears.

It goes on like that for another 8800 words. It's all very self-congratulatory stuff, with Rawson in a starring role as the Sage of History, bestowing his wisdom on the reader from on high. But hiding underneath all the melodrama and latinate words is the thesis, "This is why America sucked. I figured New Zealand was better, so I left. As it turns out, I was right about everything. Go me!" It reads more like a sermon than a story.

What the story lacks so far is any drama; his move to New Zealand was relatively painless and uneventful, and this worries him. Without any crisis to drive the plot along, what he's got is no better than a lengthy essay. He and his wife get along too well for marital strife to be a part of the narrative (though she *hates* how she's been portrayed). He's never had cause to regret leaving the States, so homesickness can't be a plot driver. He's had no difficulty adapting to living in New Zealand, which sucks away most of the marrow of an "immigrant experience" narrative.

⁸ He was so in love with this line that for a couple of months he could have married it. Now it just seems embarrassingly twee, as I suspect this entire endeavour will seem to him someday.

The only truly dramatic event from the past two years is something he can't write about. He pictures the reaction that tale's central character would have upon reading about that adventure in his words, and the aftermath he imagines makes him cringe. Have you ever seen or read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Picture what would *really* happen if after Chief's escape, his tell-all memoir of Nurse Ratched's tyranny was laid out for the perusal of strange, public eyes. Chief wouldn't live long enough to do a book signing.

This is the conundrum facing Chris Rawson: now that he's written his own story, he finds he no longer *wants* to fictionalise it. He doesn't want the thread of his own story to be subsumed within someone else's. He defends this with a lot of public handwringing about "truth in narrative", but here's the real truth: for the first time, this master con artist has managed to create something purely factual. He clings to it, selfishly, as though it's his last chance to redeem himself.

"But how can I tell the truth without telling *all* of the truth?" he asks himself, proving that redemption isn't in his stars. He's still a schemer, unwilling to unmask himself completely before an audience of strangers, because that's just not what con men do.

He wrestles with this question for months.

It is a bright cold day in April, and his iPhone strikes 13:00. Chris Rawson, his chin nuzzled into his balaclava in an effort to escape the vile wind, slips quickly through the screen door of his Hokowhitu hovel, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of freezing rain from entering along with him.⁹

Immediately within the door lies a plain brown box.

Inside the box, he finds a thick manuscript. On top of the manuscript is a handwritten letter.

I created you. You were a character. Nothing but a black-and-white drawing. Everything you've ever done, you've done because I made you do it. I'm your God... you are not mine.

⁹ With apologies to the ghost of George Orwell.

I had a life once. A *good* life, and I was happy. If any of this is even close to being true, then everything I've lost, I've lost because of you. If you really are my Creator, responsible for all that I've suffered, I promise you: I am going to kill you, Chris Rawson.

He drops the letter, chains his doors, draws all the curtains. He stands in the centre of his living room and orders his dog to guard the door. Only then does he think of his wife. She won't be home for hours. So now what: Call the police? No. Whoever left the package would wait until the police left before he struck, just like in every Deranged Killer film he's ever seen.

It might help to know what I'm up against, he decides, and he retrieves the letter. Its next few paragraphs are in a steadier hand.

I spent ten years of my life writing about yours. What did you spare for me? Short snatches of time spent painting the barest outlines of my existence. Half an hour here and there when you weren't drunk or wasting time.

I've read through this story enough times that I've memorised it. And I've got to say, length aside, it's not your best work. So what does that say about me? What does it say about you?

You already know what kind of person I am, if I'm supposed to believe what's in this manuscript. So when you read through this, since I'm supposedly just an "echo" of you, a "reflection", really *look* into that mirror and decide if you like what you see.

Stapled below the letter is a black-and-white comic strip, drawn with heavy chiaroscuro shading. The first panel depicts a man standing next to a sofa, holding a letter in one hand. In the second panel, the man reaches into a box and withdraws a thick manuscript.

The final panel is a closeup of the manuscript's title page, which reads:

THE LAST BOAT OUT OF AMERICA

BY CHRIS RAWSON

CRISIS

Mount Ruapehu lay in the distance, its summit shrouded in cumulus. Swatches of blue peered from between the clouds, hinting at a brighter world lying behind them. Just out of reach.

I sat at a scarred, desiccated, UV-bleached picnic table beside the Desert Road, near the centre of the North Island, thousands of kilometres away from where I was born. I contemplated all the things I still didn't understand about New Zealand, about the world, about life.

My wife was the biggest enigma. Unfortunate: she was the most important thing to understand. Yet here I was, more than a hundred kilometres north of her, contemplating divorce.

How it had come to this? Eight months ago, life made sense. After four years of planning, scheming, saving, hoping, waiting, we boarded a 777 in San Francisco, felt the US slip away beneath us, breathed a sigh that might have been the last time either of us felt anything approaching relief.

In the first months after we arrived, Monica and I were united in our purpose: to simply tread water. Neither of us guessed how different it would be for us down here. People spoke English, and yet they didn't. New Zealand hailed in July, froze in August, flowered in October, was warm and sunny at Christmas.

I adapted much more quickly than Monica. Palmerston North became *home* for me, but my wife, who'd spent very little of her life away from Northern California, still pined for what we'd left behind.

"Why did we bother coming here if you're not even going to *try* to like it here?" I asked her earlier that morning.

Her face twisted, and her forehead turned into a staircase. "I *am* trying!"

When she gets like this (it's been happening more and more often), I don't want to do any of the things a husband should do. I don't want to hug her, or console her, or stroke her hair, or whisper that everything's going to be all right. I don't want to make promises that I can't keep. No. What I really want to do is leave.

It hadn't always been like this with us. Maybe life in the States sucked under Bush, and that's one of the main reasons we left it. But with each other, we were content.

But this morning... what even started this whole thing?

Kiwis often ask us the same question when they hear our accents: "How do you like it here?" My answer is simple: "I love it here." So far, with very few exceptions, New Zealand is exactly what I wanted it to be. I could stay here the rest of my life.

This morning, a cashier asked us the usual. To fill the awkward silence that followed where my wife couldn't think of what to say, I interjected with my usual: "I love it here."

Once we got home, she said, "I'm getting really tired of you speaking for me in public."

"What are you talking about?"

"When someone asks how we like it here, I'd like to at least have the chance to say something." She slammed the refrigerator door.

I left the kitchen for the dining room, to put some distance between us. "Even if you have to say, 'I like it here, *but*,' it would be okay," I said. "But you can't even say that. When you stood there, silent, unable to bring yourself to say one kind word about New Zealand to a Kiwi, I was embarrassed to be standing next to you."

I didn't have a destination in mind when I got in the car. I just had to get away. I knew why she felt the way she did, but for everything from a skinned knee to a girl dumping me, my dad always had the same advice: "Get over it." It was his voice I heard when I found myself telling Monica the same thing.

We couldn't keep going the way we were.

Should I try to patch things up with her, or have the conversation I've been rehearsing in my head for months? The one that starts with, "We need to talk," and proceeds to, "We both know this isn't working," and ends with – well, I never thought it out all the way to the end, because that was the part that always terrified me.

Thousands of acres of flat, scrub-covered land lay between me and Ruapehu. Signs warned travellers not to leave the road and enter the desert proper, because the army trained there. You might wander into an artillery field during exercises. Or

maybe the desert floor was littered with landmines, and one hapless step followed by a *click* would be the coda for the crap-filled symphony of your life.

I considered vaulting the fence and wandering out into the desert. Instead, I drove back toward Palmy.

As the desert slid by outside, my iPhone, hooked into the stereo, served up songs from a playlist I named “PISSED OFF!” I picked up my iPhone and set it to shuffle all of my songs instead.

My iPhone “randomly” decided to play “Such Great Heights” by The Postal Service — musical serendipity so profound I had to pull off the side of the road, clutching the wheel in white-knuckled fists. Because that was *our* song.

Chris flips back to the title page and stares at it. *The Last Boat out of America*. It's a title he's used before, during a failed attempt at a second novel. A novel no one else knows about.

Below that: his own name, in block letters. Not the most common name, but there are other Chris Rawsons. Yet the writing that follows is unmistakable. It *sounds* like something he'd write.

Then again, how hard is it to ape someone else's style? I did it for years.

When he met Chuck Palahniuk in 2002, Chris owned up to shamelessly ripping off his technique. Palahniuk laughed, admitted he did the same thing, and signed Chris's copy of *Fight Club*. He inscribed, "Amy Hempel/Junot Díaz/Thom Jones are my GODS."

So is that what this letter meant? "I'm your god... *you are not mine.*" Was this some copycat author with a vendetta?

But then there were things in the story drawn from Chris's real life, things no copycat could know. The conflict between the narrator and his wife over their differing attitudes toward New Zealand; the iPhone playlist name; the Postal Service song.

Chris turns the page and finds another handwritten note.

That beginning wasn't good enough for you. You had to be "clever". Make everything worse, more "dramatic". I try to remember things as they're written here, in these first few pages, but it's no better than remembering a film plot. It never happened. You scrapped it, went back, shuffled everything, and figured on starting me out at an even lower point.

Wait a minute, he thinks I actually wrote this? Chris compares the manuscript to the writing he's done so far for his Master's thesis, and while they sound similar, the style of delivery is totally different. So far his would-be Bildungsroman of a thesis has been more like a Twain-style essay than this dramatic narrative.

He picks up the letter again. "*I created you,*" it says. "Everything you've ever done, you've done because I *made* you do it. I'm *your* God."

Who have I pissed off lately? Chris wonders. He reads on, hoping to find out. He finds the page numbers have started over again at one, indicating the previous chapter was indeed scrapped, the story rebooted and begun afresh.

OLD FRIENDS

Los Angeles's airport looks like a relic from the 70s and feels about as inviting as a jail. Airports don't have to be unpleasant, but LAX seems to revel in its ugliness. Flickering fluorescents cast a grey pall over stained linoleum and peeling walls. That's in the areas that *have* functional lighting. Most surfaces are either steel or bare concrete. Thousands of dismal people trudge from one labyrinthine chamber of the airport to the next. It feels like rather than being the mouth of our entrance into the US, Aleta and I have gone round to the other end of the canal.

It's not as loud as I'd feared, but it's still plenty boisterous. After seven months in New Zealand, I've grown used to *quiet*. Auckland and Wellington are still noisy, but you only have to go five minutes outside town to experience a kind of silence you won't find in the States unless you drive into the country for several hours. And Americans are *louder* than Kiwis. People standing right next to each other in the airport terminal shout so loudly I can hear them from dozens of metres away.

All three people sitting behind Aleta in this airport restaurant have iPhones; this one chick is bellowing away into her phone with a self-involved sincerity that'd be entertaining if it wasn't also irritating as hell.

I've seen fat people *everywhere* since we got here. Kiwis aren't immune from the worldwide obesity epidemic, but it's nothing like what I'm seeing in L.A. Obesity isn't the exception here, it's the *rule*. As for the "morbidly obese" (doctorspeak for *too fat to live*), I'd see somebody that fat maybe a few times a week in Palmerston North. After an hour in LAX, I've lost count.

I'm visualising a herd of lipid-choked Americans waddling across the Serengeti, sweating fear while a pride of lionesses trails them, when my "Cobb salad" arrives in a bowl bigger than my head. The waiter says something to me that's lost in my drop-jawed awe and the various restaurant patrons yodelling into their iPhones.

I can't stop staring at it. "This is a *salad*?"

"I think it's supposed to be," says Aleta.

Half a head of lettuce. A tomato which, before being sliced, was the size of my fist. Half an avocado. Two hardboiled eggs, sliced. At least 250 grams of shrimp, 400

or so grams of ham, and about 100 grams of bacon. 300 grams of cheese. And, of course, a drench of ranch dressing: a quarter-litre of it, minimum. All of this intended for one person. \$18. Thousands of calories.

It could very well be a salad. In the same sense that a garbage truck is an automobile.

A couple hours later we're over L.A., staring in nauseous wonder at a fetid soup of pollution hanging over three counties. The smog layer is so thick it caused turbulence when we ascended through it.

Looking at L.A. from above, I can't find any traces of unmanufactured landscape. Hundreds of square miles of concrete, asphalt, and steel. The Pacific Ocean sits next to this giant cancer of a city like an afterthought. I wonder what the place was like 60 years ago, before my grandparents' generation, armed with nothing but good intentions, ruined Southern California forever. Back when Orange County lived up to its name, with thousand-acre orange groves once standing where Disneyland is now. When this really was a land of dreams and opportunity instead of a place where both of those things lie down to die.

There's no fence around L.A. keeping people in, yet ten million damned souls live here anyway. I want to parachute out of the plane, run through the streets, grab every vacant-eyed, hypnotised Californian I see and shout in their faces, "Wake up! There's more to life than this! Get out of here and go *live!*"

30,000 feet above Santa Barbara, the flight attendants pass out drinks. I accept a can of Coke and a novelty-sized plastic cup from the flight attendant, then take a sip. Right away, I want to spit it all over the back of the seat in front of me. I've just had my first taste of high fructose corn syrup in seven months. The aftertaste is brutal, a chemical tang like someone poured formaldehyde in my mouth. I won't be finishing my drink.

Over Oregon, I see flight attendants moving around the cabin like they're getting ready to make an important announcement. Adrenalin jabs me in the back of the head, and I'm expecting them to tell us the plane's going down. I yank out my headphones and focus.

They're trying to sell us crap. Rental DVDs, available at airport kiosks. Subscriptions to the in-flight magazine. Memberships in a frequent-flyer rewards programme. This is the first flight I've been on where the attendants have reduced to peddling. Why not just change the name of the airline to Wal-Air and be done with it?

After the plane lands in Seattle, and during a two-hour adventure trying to get our rental car sorted, it hits me: from the moment we stepped off the plane in LAX, everything's been one long commercial. Banner ads on airport walls. TV monitors hawking goods and services. Radio announcements. Kiosks. Newspapers. Billboards and logos dominate the sky, drowning out the stars. Even the clothing people wear is a non-stop corporate shout-out.

Everywhere I look, the names and faces of old "friends" I thought I'd escaped —

Starbucks, McDonald's, Jack in the Box, Wendy's, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Budweiser, Ford, Dodge, GM, Toyota, Honda, Exxon, BP, Shell, Progressive, GEICO, All-State, AT&T, Verizon, T-Mobile, Sprint, Best Buy, Radio Shack, Bed Bath and Beyond, Walmart, The Gap, Old Navy, Nike, Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein, Levi's, Apple, Microsoft, Sony, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, Disney.

I can't rest my eyes anywhere without some logo staring back at me. Everything's been hijacked and painted over. Vandalised. I never would have noticed if I hadn't left it all behind and come back.

I think if America had a thesis statement, it'd only need one word: *MORE*. Just like that, all caps and italics. *MORE*. This country feels like a prison, with McMansions instead of cells and advertisements in place of billy clubs.

We get our car from the rental place about nine P.M. Keys in hand, I head to the right side of the car. Only after I open the door and see no steering wheel do I hear Aleta giggling behind me.

"It's been seven months," I explain, heading to the car's left side.

I sit behind the wheel, and nothing is where it's supposed to be. For the first time, I feel thankful most American cars don't have a stick shift.

Before we even get out of the parking lot: "AAHHH, where are you going?"

I slam on the brakes, pulse drumming in my ears. "What?"

“You were about to turn left!”

“So?”

“So...”

Traffic sweeps down the road in front of us. From left to right.

“Sorry about that.” I turn right instead. “The *right* side is the *right* side,” I chant to myself. “*Right* turns are *tight* turns.”

“Yes. Don’t forget.”

Mom loves Aleta. “Keep this one around,” she says when Aleta’s out of earshot. “She’ll take good care of you.” Mom never said anything close to that about Monica. “She seems nice,” Mom had said the day before I married her four years ago. “I’m sure you’ll be happy.” I could tell even then that Mom was holding back from adding, *For a while*. I’m not getting that vibe this time.

Later on we meet up with my best friend, Ron Corby, and after driving around downtown for a few hours (The *right* side is the *right* side. *Right* turns are *tight* turns), the three of us hang out in a bar near Pike Street well past midnight, reminiscing and getting blitzed on Red Hook. Ron tells his most embarrassing stories about me (“He was so drunk he started barking and chasing cars. Literally *chasing cars*”) and Aleta counters with hers (“The one time he tried on a New Zealand accent, all of our Kiwi friends laughed at him”).

Ron loves Aleta too, in his way. He gives me the thumbs-up when she leaves our table to grab a beer. “*Damn*, dude. Maybe *I* should move to New Zealand,” he says.

“She’s from Canada.”

“Oh yeah? That’s what *I’m* talkin’ *aboot*, eh? So her parents are letting you stay with them in their igloo for Christmas? Is her dad a Mountie?”

“Wow. You managed to hit almost every Canadian stereotype in about ten seconds. Well done.”

“Thank you.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Aleta asks, a fresh beer in her hand.

Ron laughs until he cries.

Before Aleta and I board a ferry for Vancouver Island, we head to Bank of America, figuring they'll give us a better exchange rate than the Canadian banks.

"How can I help you?" the teller asks us. It's a scripted line with no real interest behind it, and it makes me want to grind my teeth. Right into her neck.

"We'd like \$400 in Canadian bills, please."

Teller sucks breath between her teeth. It reminds me of a rattlesnake. "Ooo, I dunno if we have that much."

"I just called a couple hours ago, and you said you did."

"I didn't say we did. It was probably Brenda. She's the one who handles international exchanges. She's got most of our Canadian bills in her drawer."

"Can we talk to Brenda then?"

"She's on break. I can see what I have in my drawer, though." Teller ruffles through her drawer, only comes up with \$50 Canadian. "Sorry, this is all we have."

"You just said Brenda's got most of the Canadian money."

"She does. But she's on break, and I can't get in her drawer."

"Can you go get her for us?"

"No, sorry. But you can wait for her to get off her break if you want."

"We've got to be on a ferry in half an hour."

Teller shrugs. *Shrugs!* "I wish I could help you, but I can't get in Brenda's drawer."

"You can't even go get her for us?"

That shrug again. "No, sorry. She's on break."

It's like trying to reason with a vending machine. If I grab this teller by her shoulders and tip her back and forth, will I get some actual *customer service* to fall out of her?

Here's the same scenario in New Zealand:

"We'd like \$400 in (other country's denomination), please."

"Oh? Whoops, hold on a sec. Brenda's the one who handles the international currencies. She's on break at the moment, but I'll go fetch her. Just a moment."

Brenda comes out 45 seconds later; opens the drawer, completes the exchange, and goes back on break. Elapsed time: two minutes. We walk out of the bank with \$400 in (other country's denomination) without any aggravation.

Instead, Teller stands in front of us and keeps saying “No” and “sorry” — the word sounding hollow and idiotic, because if she was sorry, she’d put that Customer Fucker she’s swinging at us away, go into the back, and blow months of dust off the Customer Helper instead, wouldn’t she?

Two hours later, in a Canadian bank on the other side of Puget Sound, it takes two minutes to get some Canadian money. It’s almost like being home again.

Victoria, less than hundred miles from my mom’s place, might as well be in a different galaxy. The streets are cleaner. The buildings don’t look like they’re one failed inspection away from being condemned. Even sunlight seems brighter here. People are fitter, happier. Canadians walk around with *legitimate* smiles on their faces. Total strangers act like they’re happy to see one another. It’s creepy.

As nice as it is to visit North America, I miss NZ already. All I want to do right now is crack open a Monteith’s and a bag of chicken-flavoured chips, sit in my backyard, and bake in the New Zealand sun. I guess that means the place really is home.

I haven’t been able to sleep since we got off the plane. I keep having the same nightmare I’ve been having since Aleta and I moved in together: some faceless figure sitting on a couch with his laptop, typing sounds blasting loud as artillery strikes.

Late in the afternoon on Christmas Day, when Aleta’s family is in a post-turkey food coma, I get up to check my e-mail. After wading past several hundred backlogged messages from outraged readers demanding updates to my webcomic, I come across an e-mail whose contents make me want to throw my MacBook Pro across the room.

“Fuck!” I say, forgetting where I am.

Five heads swivel my way.

“Sorry. Just... Christ. This *sucks*.”

“What’s wrong?” Aleta asks.

“See for yourself.”

Haven't heard from you in a while, boy.

I've been wondering what the big deal about New Zealand is. I've decided to find out. I'm coming down there. I've already got tickets, and I'll be in Wellington on January 16th at 1345, Air New Zealand flight number NZ505. You can show me around the country for a couple weeks and give me some idea why the place is so much "better" than the USA.

I'm paying for all the travel and accommodations for everybody. Bring along that new girlfriend of yours. Hope she's more fun than the last one.

Dad

Upon discovering that some of the manuscript's passages come word-for-word from things Chris wrote himself during his last trip to America, he begins actively taking notes while reading the manuscript. *Salad incident: identical to mine*, he writes. *Can't stand the US after living in NZ. Anti-consumerist. Despises Los Angeles. Me, me, me.* In the margins of the manuscript, he writes, *US bank vs. Canadian bank: same thing happened to me.*

Chris circles several passages:

The *right* side is the *right* side. *Right* turns are *tight* turns -*the exact mantra I chanted to myself every time I drove in the States last year to keep from crashing*

He was so drunk he started barking and chasing cars. Literally *chasing cars* -*this actually happened in 1999*

"The one time he tried on a New Zealand accent, all of our Kiwi friends laughed at him" -*this happened too, and they've never let me live it down*

He underlines another passage: "I keep having the same nightmare [...] some faceless guy sitting on a couch with his laptop, typing sounds blasting loud as artillery strikes." -*I have a feeling this will turn out to be important*

Most of the writing in this chapter seems to come from my life, Chris wrote. *In fact, almost all of it is stuff I've written about before. Any dedicated stalker could find all of it relatively easily.*

It still doesn't tell me why someone would go to all this trouble, though.

Chris turns the page.

THE RIGHT SIDE IS THE RIGHT SIDE

I've spent the past week trying to think of a way out of this. How to politely, but firmly, tell my father to fuck off.

I've got nothing. I could tell him not to come, but he'd do it anyway. If I don't pick him up at the Wellington airport, he'll pay for a cab and come find me in Palmy. If I take my bag and go tramping in the Ruahines for two weeks, hiding out in the native bush with possums and wild boar, he'll still find me.

I can't think of anything worse than hauling my father all over New Zealand while he sits in my car's back seat judging it (and me) the whole time. I'm trying to make peace with it and surrender to the idea of him wedging himself into my life for fourteen days, but the thought of fourteen *hours* with him makes me want to cut up my credit cards and burn off my fingerprints.

Aleta doesn't understand my reaction. "He doesn't sound terrible," she says. "Maybe not the easiest guy to get along with, but is he really the monster you think he is?"

Oh, god, you have no idea. If I had my way, you'd never have to learn for yourself. But you will. In a little over two weeks, he'll appear at the baggage carousel. He'll thrust out a hand — there'll be no question of hugging. We'll make small talk. His two Marine-issue bags will appear, and I'll offer to carry one. The stubborn bastard will sling both bags over his shoulder, trying to hide how much the effort costs him.

We'll walk to the car. He'll insist on sitting in the back. You'll try to talk to him, Aleta, but he'll be cold and taciturn as a monk. I want to prepare you for the inappropriate things that will come out of this man's mouth when he does eventually speak, but there's no way. It'd be like warning you I just stank up the toilet; the words wouldn't dissipate the stench.

We'll drive up to Palmerston North. Unless prodded, my father will barely say a word. He'll give one or two syllable answers to any questions you ask him. You'll look at me as I drive, the silent question in your eyes: "Did I do something wrong?" And I'll tell you later that no, it's not you. It's him. This is his way. He's waiting for you to drop your guard. He'll wait for days, silent, inert, so still he's like part of the landscape.

You'll accept it. Accept *him*. Your discomfort will fade, and you'll lose any sense of the danger he represents. Then he'll strike.

We've spent the past week driving in a semicircle around Puget Sound (the *right* side is the *right* side. *Right* turns are *tight* turns). January 16th hovers over me everywhere. I keep waiting for someone to step in and stop this madness before it begins... please, some saviour stay my execution... but that e-mail stares back at me. *I've already got tickets, and I'll be in Wellington on January 16th. Dad.*

Aleta's worried about me, frustrated that she can't break me out of my funk. She's asked me if there's anything she can do for me at least a dozen times. "Kill me?" I said once.

Two days before our flight back home, we're at my mom's place again, watching *Jeopardy*. Every answer Trebek reads on the show, my brain has the same question.

"The general and would-be emperor who lost the Battle of Waterloo."

Why me?

"The sixth planet from the sun, best known for its complex ring system."

Why me?

I need to think. Recharge. The only way I can do that is by being alone for a while. "I'm going out for a drive."

"Do you need me to come with you?" Aleta asks.

"No... you can hang out here. I shouldn't be gone long."

Sit down behind the wheel. Start the car. Put it in reverse. Back out of mom's driveway. I feel like I'm forgetting something. My wallet? No, here it is. Phone? Have it.

I don't have a destination in mind. I just need to move. And think.

Streets flow by outside, but I don't notice. *How am I going to get out of this?*

I still feel like I'm forgetting something when light fills the windshield.

What the fu-

Wake up. You're on the floor. How'd you get on the floor?

Whose floor is this, anyway?

Where are you?

You're on a floor with a thin smear of carpet, not padded at all, just something to cover the floorboards. You're wedged between a blue ottoman and a big, sturdy-looking entertainment centre stuffed with expensive-looking electronic gadgetry. On either side of it, speakers bigger than God. On top, a mid-sized HDTV.

Dazed, you try to sit up. Vertigo, oh god, make it stop. Two blue sofas whirl around you. Or maybe it's just one, cloned via the blur in your eyes and the throb in your skull.

Other senses kick in. You're cold — *frigid*. You spot a blanket draped over one sofa. Not yet trusting your legs, you crawl to retrieve it. Once you stop shivering in the meat locker chill of the house, you have the luxury of noticing how much pain you're in. A dull, all-over ache, the kind you know will last all day despite the intervention of numerous pills and/or homeopathic remedies.

Taste: vomit. Best not to dwell on it.

Sounds: passing traffic. A snoring dog in a crate behind one sofa. A spinning hard drive atop the entertainment centre. The refrigerator's compressor.

Smells: stale cigarette smoke (secondhand), the sour smell of sweat. Once your mind, in its mercy, learns to filter out those self-made fragrances, you detect the delicate bouquet of used cat litter. Over that, the lingering kitchen smell of last night's dinner: a sharp, spicy vindaloo curry.

Five out of five senses, but you're still no better informed than before.

You haul yourself upward and sit on the sofa facing the TV. You take in more of this room: the Wii and PlayStation 3 to the left of the TV, the dining room set on the far end of the room, the cat gymnasium behind that. Surround sound speakers mounted above and behind you. A poster on the wall features a cartoon character: "**CHRIS THE NINJA PIRATE**" is his name.

Something about that name sounds familiar, doesn't it? In fact, isn't *all* of this somehow very reminiscent? But of what?

You ask your body if it dares to walk, and it says, "Please come back later." So you're left to ponder existential questions, not the least of which is, "What the hell happened to me?"

Were it not for the slivers of grey light coming from a small window on the far side of the room, you wouldn't know if it was day or night. It's day, but only just.

The wall-attenuated sound of a marimba sunders the silence. A twelve-tone melody repeats three times, then ends. With a squeak of bedsprings, a sleeper stirs into consciousness beyond the wall. The dog, too, stirs in its crate, its legs meeting audible resistance from the crate's steel walls. A black cat leaps from the top of its gymnasium and begins darting from one end of the house to another.

A door squeals open; clumsy footsteps recede. Someone urinates, followed by a flush. The vigorous, awe-inspiring cyclone of an old-style Kiwi toilet.

Footsteps again, approaching this time. A man enters the room. He's of average height, stocky, broad shouldered, wearing a blue bathrobe, blue slippers, and pyjama pants with "Guinness" written on them dozens of times. He yawns as he ambles across the room, not noticing you at all.

From an alcove behind the other sofa, he grabs a Wii Fit balance board and lays it on the floor. He turns the TV on, grabs a Wii remote, waits.

Why does he not acknowledge you? This must be his house. Here you sit, an apparent interloper, yet he does not confront you?

Only after he goes through the motions of weighing himself in Wii Fit does he turn around. You get a clear look at his face at last. The world stops making sense, because standing before you is a man who looks a great deal like an evil version of Luke Skywalker.

You know this man on sight. Some part of your mind huddles in on itself and moans. Another corner of your mind is angry: what *right* does he have to exist? But what wins out is simple curiosity.

"Where am I?" you ask, or *would* ask, if you could. But although your mouth goes through the motions, no sound escapes. The huddled, fearful part of your mind groans.

He leaves the room, giving no evidence that he's seen you. You follow, watching as he pours himself a bowl of cereal. He retreats to the rear of the house, ducking into an office crammed full of bookshelves, a desk that's half-tidy, half-disaster, and a single-sized bed piled high with veterinary manuals. He sits in front of an idling MacBook Pro and squiggles his index finger over the trackpad. The display brightens.

“What’s going on?” you attempt to ask. But nothing: no sound. If you want answers, you’re going to have to observe. And since he doesn’t seem to know you’re here, you’ll have to set aside propriety and spy over his shoulder.

He checks his e-mail, goes through updates on a couple of social networking sites, reads a few webcomics (all of which you recognise), spends half an hour reading Apple-related news. His cereal finished, the bowl sits upon one of the bookshelves, discarded and forgotten.

He switches away from his web browser and into a word processing program. Multiple windows are open, but the active one on the right side of the screen is what gains your attention, because that’s the one he’s typing in.

And these words, written here, are the ones you watch being formed as the cursor dances, left to right. These words you’re reading right now. Yes, *you*: standing behind me, jaw agape, pulse rocketing.

Now that the “author” has met the “authored”, he must ask himself a question:

Has the world ever been as real to you as it is right now?

Instead of answering, you’re asking questions.

Where am I?

You are a mote in my eye.

How did I get here?

It’s a long story.

Who are you?

Turn the page and find out.

CHRIS

I should be in Palmerston North. I should be sitting in my backyard, next to a pile of empty bottles, getting sunburnt. I should have seven thousand miles of ocean between me and all the parts of my life I hate.

I'm in Crescent City instead. Bumfuck Nowhere, California. Contemplating divorce, and murder.

I open the lid of my MacBook Pro, plug the Wacom tablet in, wait for Photoshop to load, and try to decide how to kill Chris. I put my pen on the Wacom and search for ideas.

I started *The Adventures of the Damned Human Race* back in 1999. Early on I got an e-mail from one of the five people reading the comic back then. This guy asked me, "Dude, did you know your main character looks exactly like an evil version of Luke Skywalker?" No, I didn't. Not right away. But when I went back over those first few months of comics, I saw the resemblance. So I started drawing Chris that way on purpose.

Just to get something on the screen, I sketch Cara, Chris's dog. Most of my recent comics have focused on Cara, to the point that my readers have been e-mailing me to complain that I'm going all Charles Schultz on them. If they haven't caught on yet that Chris is Charlie Brown as an adult, then I don't know what comic they've been reading for the past ten years.

Cara's half greyhound. I draw her backgrounds as an out-of-focus blur so people will get the idea she's the fastest dog in the South Pacific. Monica and I wanted to get a dog for Christmas, but we decided it didn't make sense to get one before we moved. Then we ended up not moving.

Chris gets all the breaks I don't, except when I go out of my way to screw up his life. Like today.

I draw Chris next, and because I'm feeling lazy, I put a bike helmet and sunglasses on him to make it easier. It turns out to be self-defeating, because it means I have to draw a bicycle next.

Life's been good to Chris lately. He and his wife have been having an easy time of it in New Zealand. They fight about the same stupid crap as every other married couple ever, but I find myself becoming more and more jealous of his life. Especially on days like this.

In the next panel, I draw his wife riding up behind him on her bike. It isn't often that I have them down by the river together. Chris almost always rides alone. It's only after Monica and I have a fight that Liz joins him, because then my real-world fights end up in the comic. Monica and I argue, then Liz and Chris argue. The comic's been going like that for years. I guess it works, because in ten years I've gone from a page on Geocities and a readership of maybe five people to having one of the top fifty webcomics out there (by reader numbers anyway, not by revenue).

The third panel's an over-the-shoulder angle showing Chris, Liz, and Cara heading toward a steep hill near the park entrance. In one corner of that panel, I draw a closeup of his bike's speedometer: 20 kph.

I usually draw *ADHR* in a realistic style, packed with chiaroscuro effects so people know this is a Moody Comic®. But when I'm feeling lazy, pissed off, or both, it regresses to lines and slashes.

Fourth panel: Chris reaches the top of the hill. Speedometer reads 25 kph.

Critics have said the occasional lapses into a simpler style are part of *ADHR*'s "artistic landscape," this habit I have of drawing the world in a simpler yet foreboding way when something bad's about to happen in the comic. Sure, why not? It makes me sound a lot smarter than I am.

Fifth panel: Chris is halfway down the hill. Speedometer reads 35 kph.

If people knew those sharp, stabbing lines were more about me slashing my Wacom tablet instead of slashing throats, I wonder how much artistic merit they'd find in my comic then.

Sixth panel: A split-shot. On the left side: a random jogger near the bottom of the hill — and it's clear from her position that Chris doesn't have time to bike or steer out of her way. The right side: an extreme closeup of Chris's left eye, gone wide, with the jogger's terrified expression reflected in his pupil. Between these two panels: the speedometer, reading 42 kph.

I should be driving on the left side of the road, on the right side of the car. I should be getting funny looks every time I open my mouth in public. I should be telling people where I'm from, how long I've been in New Zealand, why I moved, how much I like it there, and that I have no plans on ever leaving. Instead: Crescent City, the land that time forgot.

Last panel: Chris ditches his bike to keep from plowing into this poor jogger. The bike careens down the hill, dust and rocks flying. Chris sails over the handlebars.

It's taken me a little over an hour to draw today's comic. I'll have to wait until I get home to publish it to my site. Soon, the e-mails will come flooding in from my readers, wondering if I've finally followed through on my occasional threats to kill Chris off.

Whether Chris lives or not depends on what happens in the next few hours.

Northern California dumps rain over the Prius as I drive to Eureka. I considered heading north, maybe as far as my mom's place in Seattle, but Mom would've just told me to go back to Monica. So instead I head south as my iPhone blasts music through the Prius's speakers. Random selections from a playlist I named "PISSSED OFF!".

I haven't decided what I'm going to do once I get home. Try to patch things up with Monica? Or have the conversation I've been rehearsing in my head for months? The one that starts with, "We need to talk," and goes to, "We both know this isn't working," and ends with —

What brought us to this? We used to have this dreamy, dippy, naïve five-year plan, and it started with us getting on a plane to New Zealand and never coming back.

But first Monica's grades weren't good enough to get into the New Zealand vet school she applied to in 2007. After her grades *were* good enough, she found out the next year she didn't have all the prerequisites.

Then, this morning, she asked me how I liked her new purse. "It's a Louis Vuitton," she said.

"Cool? I guess?"

"You like it?"

"It's a purse. How much did it cost?"

“Eight hundred dollars.” She smiled and caressed the leather.

“Eight hundred dollars for a *bag*? That thing better have a TV in it! *Christ*, Monica, we’re supposed to be saving up for the move.”

“What move?”

What move. I reminded her. And I could tell by her expression what the answer to my next question would be.

“How’s your application to Massey going?”

Silence. Her fingers fidgeted with the bag. Then: “I didn’t apply.”

“Why?”

Because she doesn’t want to move to New Zealand anymore. She’s given up.

“I’d miss my family too much,” she said, her voice high and thin. “I’d miss my friends.” Her forehead turned into a staircase. “We’d be giving everything up that we know,” eyebrows scrunched together, “everything that’s comfortable,” corners of her mouth turned down. “I can’t do it.” Bottom lip stuck way out.

I thought leaving everything behind was the whole point. I told her so. Then I told her she was being selfish. Her face exploded into free-flowing saltwater and mucus. I swear she cries more often and for more reasons than anyone.

If you had to pick a person who had the right to be crying, I’d say it was me. I was the one having his hopes buried. She’d traded in something I’d dreamed about for years in exchange for an eight hundred dollar purse. But still, there she was with a betrayed look on her face.

I didn’t want to do any of the things a husband is “supposed” to do when this happens. I didn’t want to hug her, or console her, or stroke her hair, or whisper that everything’s going to be all right. I didn’t want to make promises that I can’t keep. No. What I wanted to do was leave.

I find myself thinking about Chris and Liz, and how they have the marriage and the life I’ve always wanted. Monica is clingy and needy and always questioning whether I really love her (“Why don’t you ever spend *time* with me? Why don’t you *pay attention* to me? Why don’t you *love* me?”). Liz knows when to leave Chris the hell alone. She’s not perfect (no one would believe in the comic if she was), but she’s nowhere near as high-maintenance as Monica. Monica’s never questioned why I write

Liz that way, and it's a good thing, because Liz is everything I've wished Monica could be.

I pull off the side of the road to adjust my iPhone and set it to a different playlist. Listening to angry music usually puts me in a better mood, but today it's just making things worse.

I can't kill Chris off. After ten years he's become a reflection of me, an echo. If I kill him off, I'll be killing a part of me, too. Maybe the only part of me I still like.

I set my iPhone to shuffle through all its songs instead. A few seconds later, this kind of bitter laugh chokes out of me, because from the opening notes I can tell that out of over 1500 songs, the one that's come up at "random" is *our* song.

Even though it's all a random soup of numbers, this life, sometimes it's hard to discount the idea that something out there is sending you coded messages. It's all bullshit, just the brain grasping for greater meaning in a world devoid of it. But when I start driving again with the sound of *our song* filling the car, I can't help but wonder if maybe the universe is trying to tell me something.

My body drives down Highway 101, surrounded by a red/brown blur of redwood trees, but my brain has checked out. It's gone to San Diego, almost six years ago, to the day I met Monica, to the guest room of my dad's place.

My dad lived in a spartan apartment every bit as prefab and soulless as the anonymous quarters he'd had in his thirty-two years in the Marine Corps. The guest room was even worse than the rest of the house: double bed, end table with lamp, an unremarkable chest of drawers. All that was missing was a Bible, "Placed by the Gideons," in the top drawer of the end table.

In the living room, Dad sat in his recliner that never reclined. No matter where he sat, he always sat with his back straight. That morning, his hard, harsh eyes were fixed on CNN. Baghdad was burning.

"Morning," he said, without even twitching his eyes away from the TV.

I sat on the sofa and watched as Iraq got blown to hell, in stereo. "There any coffee?"

"Not anymore. Pot's in the kitchen if you want to make more." Still he didn't move his eyes from the screen. I'd gotten used to that. Once Dad zeroed in on something, once his concentration was that focused, nothing would break it. Fifteen

years as a scout sniper in the Corps did that to him, along with another fifteen years *teaching* people how to be a scout sniper.

My father was a dangerous bastard when he was younger. He didn't wait to be drafted to Vietnam. In mid-1968, hours after graduating high school, he signed up at his local recruiter. He did a tour from '68 to '69, and according to him he was so good at killing "gooks" that instead of sending him to another tour right away, they sent him back to the States for sniper training. Once he finished, he went straight back to Nam. He's never talked about what he did on his subsequent tours there. I asked him once how many people he'd killed, when I was writing a report on him for third grade. He fixed those bore-sighted pupils on my face and said, "I stopped keeping track at 200, but only 38 of them counted," before turning back to his football game.

We spent most of my early childhood around San Diego while he worked as an instructor at the 1st Marine Division Scout Sniper School. He was hardly ever around, and when he was, all he did was drink beer and watch TV. His parenting tactics were straight out of the Marine Corps field manual.

Eventually, Mom decided she'd had enough of him. She and I packed our belongings and moved to Seattle in '87. From then until I graduated from high school in '95, my dad and I barely spoke at all outside of my occasional visits to San Diego. He got very interested in my future in my final months of high school. "My father was a Marine," he told me several times, naming all the Pacific Islands that Grandpa stomped flat on his march toward Tokyo and Tojo. He tried selling me on family tradition, honor, commitment, courage, self discipline. When that didn't work, he tried selling me on college benefits. When I joined a band in Seattle instead, the phone calls and letters stopped. I didn't hear from him again until a couple weeks after 9/11. I got a letter that opened, "I bet the Corps wishes they hadn't forced me to retire now."

I got up to make myself some coffee. I'd done the entire drive from Seattle to San Diego without stopping to rest any longer than it took to get gas or order food at a drive-thru. Dad had asked me to help him move out of his apartment in San Diego and into a condo in Las Vegas. Since this was the first time I could remember him asking my help for *anything*, I obliged him. Problem was, I had almost no vacation time left at work, so I had to haul ass down here and back so I didn't lose too much pay.

As I took the first sip, I heard a whoop from the living room.

I found him sitting at the edge of his recliner, his back still straight (which always made me wonder why he got a *recliner* in the first place) and a beer in his hand. At eight in the morning. When we were supposed to be spending the day packing furniture into a U-Haul.

I cleared my throat. “Isn’t it kind of early for beer?”

“Nope,” he said, and emptied the can. “Time to celebrate.” He stood up and walked past me into the kitchen.

It’s always disappointed me that I never grew taller than my father. I always hoped for a day when I’d be able to look down on *him* for a change. But mom’s genes sold me out. That was bad enough, but even at 52 my dad looked like he was carved out of granite. Whether he admits it or not, every young boy dreams of the day he can kick his father’s ass; at this rate, I’d have to wait until mine was in a wheelchair, or on a stretcher.

Even so, as he fished another Budweiser out of the fridge and loped back to the couch to watch more of America’s billion-dollar-a-day Middle East fireworks extravaganza, I wanted to grind his face into the carpet. The whiff I got as he walked past told me he was well-lit, and he’d be useless for moving anything that day other than his beer arm.

“What are you celebrating?” I asked him.

His face screwed up, and he looked at me like I’d just asked him if I could take a dump on his carpet. “What am I celebrating? The war, you dummy. We’re finally going in and taking out that son of a bitch Saddam like we should have the last time.” He snorted, took another swig of his beer, and turned back to the TV.

I watched him watch the war for a couple minutes. It was clear he was going to sit there all day, having forgotten why I came down here.

I tried to decide what I would say to him. Appealing to his finer feelings wouldn’t work, because as far as I knew, he didn’t have any. He never remarried after mom left him, and this was the first time we’d slept under the same roof in seven years. The world had moved on without him, but even worse, so had the Corps. There it was, on the TV in front of him: a war fought by people he trained. He could never be anything more than a spectator.

I felt sorry for him. Whatever else I felt about the man, I also felt pity. Pity for a man who, when I was nine years old, made me hang by my arms from a chin-up bar in the back yard until my fingers gave out, over and over, because I got a C on a geography test. Pity for the man who kept me locked in a closet for twelve hours when I wouldn't tell him where mom was planning on moving us after the divorce. Pity for the man who, when I told him I had no intention of following in his footsteps, turned his back on me for more than six years.

I felt pity for him. And that was what set me off.

I stepped in front of the TV. He tried to angle around me so he could watch the dead and dying Iraqis, then turned his eyes on me and said, "You make a better door than window."

I knew there were only two ways I was going to be able to get to him. The first path was by using logic. Later, if that didn't work, I'd have to use anger.

"I'm sure what's happening in Baghdad is very interesting, but you've only got this U-Haul truck for three days. It's gonna take a day to load it up and a day to unload it. You don't have time to sit around, watch TV, and drink beer. Not unless you wanna spend a whole lot more money for this move."

"Guess I'll have to. Can't go anywhere today."

I folded my arms. "Why not?"

He gestured to the screen behind me with his beer. "I can't miss this."

"You're already missing it. You're in San Diego, not Iraq. They're gonna kick Saddam's ass whether you watch them do it or not."

He set his beer down and folded his hands together. And he did something I'd never seen him do before: he *slouched*. "You just don't get it, boy. I was there the first time. Back in '91. We had a chance to take care of things then, but we blew it. They pulled us out too soon. Now they're doing it right. Now they're doing what we should have done back then."

"Oh yeah? What is this supposed to save us from? All those WMDs Bush says are over there? Saddam doesn't have any plutonium or anthrax. This is all about the oil, and anybody who says otherwise is a liar."

His face got red. "Watch your mouth, boy."

Logic wasn't working. It was time to try anger. "I drove 1200 miles in thirty hours so you could sit there, drink, and tell me to *watch my mouth*? Are you fucking kidding me?"

He stood.

I was ready to do whatever I had to in the next few seconds: grab the TV behind me and throw it at him, run out the front door, jump in my Nova, and race back to Seattle. But he wasn't so drunk that he'd lost his self-control. He sat down, looked away, and said, "Get out."

I might as well have tried to reason with one of his rifles.

I went to the guest room, grabbed my backpack, slung it over my shoulder. I hadn't unpacked. Hadn't even changed out of my clothes.

In the living room, my father sat in his recliner that never reclined, his back erect again, his head turned almost 90 degrees to the right so he wouldn't have to look at me.

"Don't bother asking me for help again," I said.

"Never wanted your help. Never wanted *you*."

I didn't give him the satisfaction of slamming the door behind me.

When I started the car, I didn't even have a destination in mind. I headed up I-5 for awhile, but when the smog layer over L.A. crested the horizon, I realized I didn't want to head back to Seattle the way I came. I-5 might be the most efficient highway in the world, as long as you glaze over the traffic jams in Seattle and L.A., but the drive's so boring it's almost painful. If you want a scenic route along the coast, you've got to take Highway 1, the Pacific Coast Highway. I had three days to get back to Seattle, so that's the way I went.

I'd driven all over the country in my Nova. The car was more Bondo than steel when I got it, but I spent most of a year restoring it. Driving that Nova was like sitting on a comfortable sofa with a steering wheel in front of it.

But that was on the interstates, where you could turn on the cruise control, prop your knee on the steering wheel, and take a nap for a while. PCH was hundreds of miles of two-lane roads, blind turns and even blinder tourists, and dropoffs of a hundred feet or more on the west side of a flimsy-looking guardrail. The scenery was a transcendental melange of mountains and seascapes, but I was so white-knuckle paranoid driving on that road that I didn't get much enjoyment out of it.

I got to Eureka at about eleven that night —
— but then I pull into my driveway in Eureka six years later, and the flashback ends.

I meant to spend the drive back home thinking about Monica. How we met at her mom's motel six years ago. How "Such Great Heights" by The Postal Service had been playing on the lobby's radio when I walked in, and because of that, it became *our* song. How only a few hours later, I decided to quit my job in Seattle and move to Eureka to be closer to her. (Before you decide I'm a hopeless romantic, consider first that the media conglomerate I worked for was planning on consolidating its editorial offices to Cleveland and Albuquerque, and I would rather have had acid poured in my eyes than live in either of those cities, so I was planning on fleeing Puget Sound anyway — I just found a more "narratively satisfying" reason for doing so.) I meant to think about how we moved in together right away, and she kept working at her mom's motel in Eureka while I got a job fixing Macs at a store in Arcata.

Even after pulling into the driveway, I still haven't decided if I'm going to stay with her or not. Although the trip from Crescent City to Eureka hasn't been long enough for me to do a proper flashback, I sit in the driveway and hit the highlights reel of my relationship with Monica through the photos on my iPhone. Here's our July 2005 oceanside wedding: Monica, me, and her hippy mother; Monica's tree-hugging, hemp-wearing friends; my mother, drunk on pain meds; my best friend Ron Corby, wearing ridiculous-looking Navy dress blues that were way too tight around his midsection. All of us standing barefoot in the warm sand. The Pacific Ocean churned behind us as the Justice of the Peace shouted himself hoarse.

There's no pictures of my father, who refused to attend the wedding when he found out that it wouldn't be held in a church or administered by a preacher of any denomination. We had the ceremony on my birthday ("Getting married on your birthday is self-indulgent," my father said), which happened to be on a Sunday ("Getting married on a Sunday is *blasphemous*. Sundays aren't for getting married, they're for going to *church*").

I want to remember how instead of taking a honeymoon right away, Monica and I decided to concentrate all of our resources for the next three years into getting her on

the fast track to a biology degree, so she could apply to veterinary school at Massey University and get us the hell out of the United States.

Instead of thinking about meeting Monica, falling in love, living together, getting married, working together to escape before we missed the last boat out of America, I've spent almost the entire two-hour drive thinking about my brief nuclear war with my drunken father.

I want to remember the six years Monica and I have lived together in Eureka, because it's the closest thing to "home" that I've ever known. I swipe through hundreds of photos on my iPhone. From 2003 to 2005, we're grinning all the time. '06 and '07, the smiles get thinner, strained. By 2008, neither one of us is smiling anymore. So far this year, there aren't any photos of us together.

In the time it takes to walk from the Prius to my front door, I go down the Decision Matrix, an almost mathematical construct that condenses even the most complex life difficulties into a simple equation.

I: ARE YOU HAPPY (YES/NO)?

— IF YES, DO NOTHING. IF NO, PROCEED TO NEXT STEP.

II: IF THERE IS NO CHANGE IN CURRENT CONDITIONS, WILL YOU **EVER BE HAPPY (YES/NO)?**

— IF YES, DO NOTHING. IF NO, PROCEED TO NEXT STEP.

III: DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

Step I is easy enough. Hell no, I'm not happy. I can't remember the last time I *was*.

Step II is no more difficult to answer. I've been using *The Adventures of the Damned Human Race* as a coping mechanism for years, with our arguments resolved in the stroke of a pen. As much as I love to screw up Chris's life for dramatic effect, as much fun as it is to watch this character scurry through life with some looming shadow always threatening to crush his dreams under a big stamp that says, **NO YOU MAY NOT, AND FOR NO GOOD REASON**, as much as all that seems to entertain my more sadistic readers, in many ways I envy my own creation. In the twisted,

nihilistic world I've created, there's a bright center: Chris and Liz always resolve their problems. Monica and I never do.

Step III is usually the hardest part, because once I realize I need to do something, I have to go down yet another kaleidoscopic path. But here, there's only two options, which the Clash once summarised so well: should I stay, or should I go?

I still don't know the answer to that question as my key turns tumblers in the front door's lock. Nor do I know the answer as the door swings open on my living room. I have no idea which path to take as I wander through the house, heading for the bedroom, suspecting nothing.

In the center of the bed, perched on the black comforter Monica uses to keep her warm all year, is a white envelope with my name written on it. I know what's in that envelope without reaching for it, without opening it, without reading Monica's illegible cursive. I know what's in that envelope because the closet door is open, and the closet is empty.

And that's the very moment when I know whether I want to leave my wife or not.

Chris dropped the manuscript.

My wife, Liz. My dog, Cara. And me. All characters in a webcomic? A comic that's just coincidentally got the same name as an online column I used to write? The description of my house was perfect in every detail. The bike accident, too; everything he wrote is exactly how it happened.

His life doesn't just read like something I'd have written. It's like some alternate universe version of my own life, one that answers the question, "What if I hadn't moved to New Zealand?"... and this wouldn't be the first time I'd written a story like that.

Except I didn't write this story. But he thinks I did.

Monica's personality, the Decision Matrix: almost identical to my nine-month relationship with my ex, Megan, ten years ago. If anything, Monica's portrayal was far more favourable than I might have granted her if I had written this story.

Strange how little time the narrator spent talking about his wife compared to how much he discussed his father. And his father was almost nothing like mine. I certainly couldn't see Dad cheering on the Iraq invasion, considering he's spent about a decade and a half living in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. And he's definitely not a drunken killing machine; he was a prison guard during his stint in the Marines, and as far as I know, he's a teetotaler.

The biggest and most vital question remains unanswered: Who wrote this story? Clearly, whoever wrote the letter thought I wrote it, but though the tone, style, and certain elements of plot and characterisation match, I did not write it. On the other hand, he wrote The Adventures of the Damned Human Race, starring me, depicting my life. But above that we've got The Last Boat out of America, starring him, depicting his life, and supposedly written by me.¹⁰ So far, everything he's described in the comic has actually happened. How much of The Last Boat out of America is true?

A Google search for "The Adventures of the Damned Human Race" turns up only Chris's old columns, a series of fictional, occasionally semi-autobiographical pieces. No webcomic. He considers searching for the main character, but after scanning through what he's read so far, Chris realises that

¹⁰ And above *that* we have *Infinite Regress*. Pay attention, there will be a test later.

whoever wrote *The Last Boat out of America* went out of his way to be “postmodern” and made the main character a nameless, nobody “Narrator”.

The only identity he has is “I”. Maybe that’s why he’s so pissed off.

Chris looks up from the manuscript and reviews his surroundings. *His vision of my house was almost perfect, but evidently not of his invention.* He glances at a poster on the far wall. *He doesn’t know who Chris the Ninja Pirate is, for instance.¹¹ He didn’t recognise his surroundings. There’s strike one against the theory that he’s the author of my existence.*

Chris reads the narrator’s opening letter again. Their tone and content imply that he, *Chris Rawson*, wrote the narrative. The narrative’s parallels between his real life and the narrator’s fictional life imply the same thing.

He creates a chart, trying to reason things through.

Possibilities (in rough order of likelihood)

Psychological

1. I’ve gone nuts and I’m imagining all this. Seems too detailed for a hallucination though.

2. I did write it, and I just don’t remember. Have to be one hell of a long dissociative fugue for me to come up with this. Pretty sure Liz would’ve noticed. Might explain why I never wake up feeling rested?

Vendetta

Someone who knows me really well wrote this, and they’re just screwing with me. Problem: the only person who knows me well enough to write something like this is my wife, who’s not exactly a writer.

Star Trek

1. I wrote this, but I haven’t written it yet. Time travel, Mr Spock.

2. An “alternate universe” version of me wrote this.

¹¹ You probably don’t, either. Chris the Ninja Pirate is a character from an obscure British webtoon called “Weebl and Bob”. I do indeed have a poster featuring this character hanging in my living room (something you’d expect The Supposed Author of My Existence to know).

Yeah, right. Moving on.

Narrator

1. I really *am* just a fictional character in this guy's world, and this whole scenario is just his way of injecting some drama into his story. Problem A: I'm pretty sure if someone *did* make a story out of my life, it'd be so confusing no one would read it. Problem B: I think, therefore I am. I know I exist; he's the one who's questioning everything.¹²

I've spent most of this time thinking of the narrator like he's a real person. What if he's not? I don't have any evidence he exists other than this manuscript. The letters could just be fictional adjuncts to the narrative. That still doesn't tell me who did write this. I guess there's only one way to find out.

He retrieves the manuscript and reads on.

¹² Anyone in "Chris Rawson's" position would likely be just as dismissive of the possibility of his existence as a fictional character in someone else's narrative. We take the fact of our own consciousness for granted as something so *obvious* that it's barely worth questioning. This tendency is further compounded in Chris's case: possessed of a disdain for authority that almost approaches a *pathological* animosity (brought about via traumatic experiences in the US Navy), Chris immediately discounts the possibility of any sort of "puppetmaster" dictating his fate/destiny (two concepts that, as a scientifically-minded atheist, he doesn't believe in anyway). Hence, Chris is far more accepting of psychological and/or fantastical explanations for his current dilemma than any explanation which makes him someone else's pawn.

THE ADVENTURES OF THE DAMNED HUMAN RACE

We meet with an arbitrator in downtown Eureka, some kid Monica's age who just got his law degree. I get there first, and he and I BS about video games (he *loves* his Xbox) for about ten minutes before Monica shows up. She's wearing all black (very dramatic). She's also wearing an expression that makes it so I have to struggle not to laugh. The way she's looking at me, eyes narrowed, lips in a rictus, nostrils flared, makes her look like she's about to ask which one of us just farted.

For the next hour, Xbox Lawyer talks us through "the process" (as he calls it) with fancy-pants phrases like "irreconcilable differences" and "collaborative divorce". Behind him is a whiteboard showing the half-erased calculations from some other ex-couple's dissolution.

He slides a sheet of paper to me. "Sign here, and that will finalize it."

I take the paper from him, and his pen. And rather than looking over the paperwork, I find myself staring at the pen. It's a black, plastic Bic, the kind that comes in a 10-pack at Target. It's not a lawyer's pen. It's a student's pen. It's out of place here. It doesn't belong. The *absurdity* of this pen. Of this lawyer, this office, this situation.

I still love my wife. I don't want to do this.

"Take your time," Xbox Lawyer says.

I don't need more time. I need my wife back.

I look at Monica, and I try to see past the disgusted expression on her face. I try to see the woman I fell in love with six years ago. And I *can* see her, hiding behind this hateful mask: the 2003 model of Monica, still smiling, still radiant, still in love with me.

Her letter, when I finally got around to reading it, said that she couldn't bear another day with an unsympathetic man. And she's right. I haven't been sympathetic. I've been so focused on getting us out of here that I haven't considered her feelings at all. I'd been ready to leave her because she wasn't ready to leave Eureka.

I have to make this right.

I set the pen down.

Monica picks the pen up. Grabs the paper. Signs it.

Something in my chest collapses.

Xbox Lawyer passes the paper and the ridiculous Bic back to me. I stare at Monica's signature. The pen's tip dug into the paper's fibers, like she was etching stone. In a very real way, she was.

I sigh, and sign.

I don't have anything left to say, so I stand and walk toward the door.

"Hey, we're not finished yet. Where are you going?" Xbox Lawyer asks.

Where else am I going to go now that I have nothing left, not even excuses?

"New Zealand."

When I first moved to Eureka back in '03 so I could live with Monica, it seemed like an oasis of calm and quiet, with hundreds of miles separating it from the rest of the world in every direction. It's not an island, but it might as well be, because Highway 101 is the only way in or out.

A few miles north of Eureka is its smaller, stupider, hippy kid sister Arcata. Eureka's laid back and normal as small cities go. Arcata's not. Arcata's full of the kind of people who thought passing a city ordinance condemning the Bush Administration's actions in Iraq was actually going to accomplish anything. It's like all the Haight-Ashbury burnouts from the '60s ended up moving a couple hundred miles north and converged in one town, a town that's now a perpetual fog of THC and patchouli.

I live a couple blocks from downtown Eureka in a house that, from the outside, looks like it was barfed out of Victorian England. I work in Arcata, in a computer repair shop right on the town square. Every morning I get in my Prius and drive 15 miles north to Arcata, try to find parking, and wade around the protesters and hippy drum circles and miniature pavilions with greasy-haired flower-power weirdos trying to sell me crystals (healing, harmony, success) or, on some weekends, weed.

One morning, I walked past a "didjeridoo massage" stand. This otherwise normal-looking guy was lying face-up and eyes closed in the grass of the square; above him, scurrying around in jerky motions like it meant anything at all, some guy who

looked like a cross between John Lennon and Cheech Marin was blowing a didjeridoo at him. “Didjeridoo Massage” the sign said, “\$15 for 15 minutes.”

As weird as this area is, it’s been one of the better places to ride out the Bush Years. But it’s not somewhere I can picture myself living for the rest of my life. Especially now.

Nothing about the divorce has ended up in *ADHR*. I decided not to kill Chris, but I couldn’t let him get away from his bike accident without at least scarring him for life. My readers have no idea what’s going on in my personal life, and I prefer to keep it that way.

I’m almost as sad about losing Monica’s family as I am about losing Monica. I used to go fishing with her brother, Russell, when we both had time off from work. He was a major Mac geek like me, so we had plenty to talk about between swigs of his home-brewed beer. Everyone else in her family was so nice, so *sane*, that I often wondered if Monica was adopted. Monica’s making me out to be the asshole in all of this, so her kind, supportive family has gone full pit bull on me. I’ll bet she hasn’t told any of them who signed that piece of paper first.

Everything I know about New Zealand comes from secondhand sources. Books written by tourists or immigrants. YouTube videos from the tourism industry. Episodes from travel shows like *No Reservations*. Special features on the *Lord of the Rings* DVDs. Articles on Wikipedia. Travel books from Frommer’s.

For the past eight months I’ve been writing about New Zealand without ever having set foot on it. I’ve cheated by having Chris hang out at home most of the time and casting most of his friends as North American immigrants like him, so he never interacts with the locals much. The landscape is easy enough to reproduce from photographs, and the general layout is all over Google Maps. The only iffy part was depicting a three-week vacation he and Liz took all over the North Island in November of last year. I got away with it through careful study of my travel books, supplemented with information from e-mail interviews with American and Canadian students living down there.

Only my Kiwi readers have noticed anything fudged about *ADHR*, but most of them have been polite in pointing out the odd errors I've made. No one else has noticed anything wrong with my invented portrayal of New Zealand, although a lot of my readers have e-mailed me to say that the comic is a lot less interesting now that Chris is happy.

Once I got Chris and Liz into New Zealand, I lost about a quarter of my readers. The drama I'd built up over the years had been sucked out of the comic. Instead of being a story about someone *striving* for something, *ADHR* became a story about someone who *had striven*, and succeeded. Readers who were used to the old dynamic of the comic, where everything was about the *struggle* to succeed, had all sorts of "fun" things to say once the focus of the comic changed. I lost track of how many e-mails I got telling me how "betrayed" someone felt by the comic's shift in tone. I'm guessing these same trolls would be thrilled if, instead of the sort of idealized existence I've written into the comic, I'd started writing about *my* drama-filled life instead.

Chris's arc over the past ten years has been one where he accumulates all the things that would have made *me* happy in the same scenario. He started off life in the comic as a bitter misanthrope with no money, few friends, and no relationship prospects. When I was an Angry Young Man writing a comic *about* an Angry Young Man, I had ugly things to say about the world, and I said them through Chris. That's what drew readers in, because the internet is full of people just like I used to be. Lonely, bitter, angry guys who don't even know what they're angry *about*, just that they're pissed off, and it's everybody else's fault (somehow). But over the years, the comic started becoming less of a Chris vs. Existence semi-weekly rant and became something many readers weren't expecting.

Writing about New Zealand wasn't about pure escapism at first. I also wanted to show Monica two people moving to the other side of the world, for the same reasons, following the same plan. My "subtle" message to Monica: as long as we stuck together, we'd be golden.

Monica read my comic, but she never looked past its surface details. When I started the New Zealand storyline to prod her along, she didn't get it. When Liz didn't get into vet school the first time she applied, I had Chris go on a monthlong self-

destructive bender. Rivers of booze flowed through every panel of the comic, clues left for Monica about how the same scenario was affecting me in the real world.

That turned out *real* well.

What's more depressing than an empty house? Not the empty house you're moving into that's a *tabula rasa* full of promise and potential, but the empty house you're leaving behind, that in the space of a few days or hours gets transformed from something you not only lived in but *inhabited* for years into a lacuna, a modern-day cave bereft of any trace of your *self*. This one-time haven, this reflection of you, is now poised to become someone else's *tabula rasa* after you've left. You can come back later, if you want to be ghoulish about it, and see what's become of the place after you've gone. You'll find strangers there, infesting it, pumping it full of their own pathogenic memories.

Amid the ruins of my former life, with fast food wrappers roaming free and wild between a coffee-stained endtable, a decaying wicker chair, and my travel bag, I guzzle a bottle of the only Southern Hemisphere wine I could find—Rawson's Retreat—in about half an hour.

Somewhere near the bottom third of the Merlot, I find myself staring at the last piece of paper I retrieved from my printer before selling it for \$25 at a yard sale: my ticket to Auckland, where my plane will touch down in three weeks.

I considered moving back to Seattle, where Mom could smother me in layers of well-meaning sympathy ranging from misguided to passive-aggressive (I got the "You know, I never liked her" e-mail two days after revealing the upcoming divorce). And I can hear my friend Ron already: "Fuck her, man. You can do better than that patchouli-drenched whore, anyway. You can do better *tonight*. I know you're hurting now or whatever, but what you really need to do now is just find some chick you don't even care about, take her home and just... *RRRRR!* Let the healing begin!"

Ron will never get married, because he has the singular luxury of not giving a damn what anyone thinks of him, doubly so if they happen to have boobs. At times, I've almost envied him for that. It's something I could use right now.

I try sorting things into separate piles: keeping, trashing, donating. After a while I give up. Everything not going with me to New Zealand ends up in trash bags, except the furniture, which just ends up on the side of the road.

I spy on the street from my front window as people gather around the spurned furniture and glance this way and that as their brains try to grok the concept: Yes, this *is* furniture someone else doesn't want, and they want rid of it bad enough that they're willing to say, "If you want it, grab it. I don't give a shit."

Within an hour, all that's left in front of my house is a dozen trash bags. All that's left inside the house is me, my MacBook Pro, and a bag full of clothes. Tomorrow, even all of that will be gone. So will I.

As Chris reads through this character study of his would-be nemesis, the disconcerting feeling of reading an echo of himself grows stronger. It raises equally uncomfortable questions about things he's been afraid to confront.

What would I have done if Liz had refused to move to New Zealand? he wonders. Would I have alienated her? Ended up alone? Flown down here anyway to take on the whole country by myself?

As for his divorce: this is what he blames me for? He brought this on himself. He had a model to follow for a successful relationship, if he really knows as much about me as he seems to. He should have known that Liz and I work together. If his marriage was so important to him he's willing to kill me for wrecking it, then he should have realised it before the divorce papers were sitting in front of him.

Chris checks the box and its contents again, looking for an address, a name, anything that might identify his adversary. Still he finds nothing.

Absurd as the next thought is, it comes to him unbidden anyway.

If he really has been writing my life story all this time, he's the one who's got some things to answer for.

Surprised at himself, Chris sets the manuscript aside. *I'm starting to take this a bit too seriously.*¹³

Under normal circumstances he'd consider skipping to the end of a story a cardinal sin, but not this time. He retrieves the manuscript and leafs to its final page.

The last days with my father passed in silence. We dropped him off at the airport without so much as a goodbye. I haven't heard from him since, and I don't think I ever will again. He's suffered his penance, and so have I. Neither of us has anything left to say.

Two weeks with him, filtered through the lens of *The Adventures of the Damned Human Race*, revitalised the comic for two months. But with the conclusion of that storyline, after Chris and Liz found themselves free and clear of drama, I banged my head against my desk for days trying to figure out where to

¹³ Occupational hazard.

go next. After almost eleven years, it's hard to imagine any more compelling adventures for this damned human race.

Maybe there are no stories left to tell. Or maybe it's time I stop telling someone else's story and start telling my own.

In the final episode of the comic, Chris sits in front of his laptop, places his hands over the keys, begins to write. The last panel is nothing more than bare text against a white background. The beginning:

THE LAST BOAT OUT OF AMERICA

BY CHRIS RAWSON

Below that was a handwritten note.

*My nights are still filled with the
mortar blasts of fingers against keys.*

It's all folded in on itself. This narrator's story, The Last Boat out of America, is something "Chris Rawson" wrote. But "Chris Rawson" wrote the story within The Adventures of the Damned Human Race, a webcomic that the narrator wrote.

It was an infinite loop, like the simple programs he'd once coded into school computers to confound and irritate his teachers:

```
10 PRINT "THIS COMPUTER IS BROKEN"
20 GOTO 10
```

The computer would keep displaying whatever message he'd programmed into it, again and again, until it was shut down or the program was interrupted somehow. Chris was dealing with something similar here, except the programmer's identity eluded him.

Whatever else he says, there's no way this narrator authored my entire existence through his webcomic. For one thing, the world I live in is far too

weirdly complex to have come from any one person's imagination. And he keeps talking about having lots of fans; I find it very hard to believe that so many people would find my life interesting. I don't even find it interesting most of the time.

As for killing me off, I think if he could have, he'd have done it already. If he's my creator, all he'd need to do is write up a nice car accident, an aneurysm, an axe murderer, a piece of space debris falling on my head. Even if he does have the power to kill me, I think he's afraid to use it... because if I am his creator, then if I die, so does he.

So far, this flashback is playing out in roughly the same way I'd have written a fictionalised version of my immigration to New Zealand. It's got far more drama than my own experiences... I didn't have to leave my wife to leave the States. Moving here and adapting to the country was actually sort of anticlimactic after all it took to get here. If his story keeps following that whole Bildungsroman road, it'll be interesting to see how differently things turn out for him once he gets there.

JET LAG

Seattle hasn't changed much in six years. It's still crammed with hipsters and self-righteous yuppies. The kind of people who, oblivious to the irony, sit in Starbucks ranting about the evils of technology while pairs of white earbuds dangle along their jawlines toward the iPods concealed in their too-tight designer jeans. Or like this chick with dreadlocks who, in the middle of a stunned steakhouse, once jumped on top of a table and screamed, "Meat is murder!"

And here I thought I left Arcata behind me. Turns out Seattle's "culture" (here's where I make a jerking-off motion with my left hand) is identical, just Seattle's hippies make more money and bathe more often.

Ron lets me stay at his place for the three weeks between leaving Eureka and leaving the US. He spends most of that time trying to get me drunk, and he succeeds many times over. He doesn't try to push me into rebound sex with any of the women wandering through University Heights, and it surprises me enough to ask him about it.

"I guess I figured you didn't want anything to do with women right about now," he says.

"I thought you'd be preaching the virtues of banging chicks I'd never see again so I could 'get over myself'."

He shrugs. "Maybe six years ago I would've. But I know you well enough to know you wouldn't go for it. Unless you want—?"

"No. But thanks, man."

I dread visiting my mom, not just because she'll be overflowing with passive-aggressive sympathy for my divorce. She'll also be on the express train to Crazytown because I'm leaving the country. When I stand at her door and knock, I've got a knot in my stomach that's got nothing to do with the Jägermeister that gave a jaunty farewell wave on its arc toward the bathroom floor last night.

"Eat something, you look like a stick," she tells me within five minutes of sitting down in her living room, even though I'm already thirty pounds overweight.

Catching up with Mom never takes long, because nothing happens to her anymore. She gets settlement checks every month from the hospital she used to work for — more money than she even knows what to do with — so she watches TV all day, every day, with one or more of her cats in her lap.

“Have you heard from your father lately?” she asks during a commercial break, her voice’s register getting nasal with disdain around the words *your father*.

“No. I got an e-mail from him a couple months ago, but nothing since then.”

Then, out of nowhere: “Why *New Zealand*? Just tell me, why there? Why not Oregon, or Vancouver? I just don’t understand why you have to go live on the other side of the *world*.” I hear that same frantic tone that Monica used to get when things weren’t going her way, when a Chernobyl of tears was inbound. “Who’s going to take care of *me*?”

Only in her mid-fifties, my mother is already worried about her senescence. Never say she doesn’t plan ahead.

“I’ve made my decision. I’m not changing my mind.”

She sends a long stream of air through her nose, crosses her arms, and stares off into the distance, eyes focused on nothing. Very familiar somehow.

“Well, I just hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for down there.”

“Me too.” *Especially since I have no idea what that is.*

I don’t like to fly. When I drive, I’m in control of my own destiny. If I die in a car accident, it’s probably my own dumbassed fault. I can accept that.

Six miles above Earth, I’m dependent on dozens of people for my well-being. The pilots, who may or may not be drunk. Air traffic controllers strung out on caffeine, with sludgy blood crawling through concrete arteries. Minimum-wage maintenance crews. The other passengers. The “super-sleuths” of the TSA.

As this titanium tube hurtles off the tarmac, most of my brain is picturing the plane skewing out of control, gravity taking its merciless hold, a split second stretched into an eternity of shattered metal, fire kissing my face just before it vivisects my traitorous body.

After landing at LAX, I grab my bag and head for the international terminal. And I've decided there's no way I'm getting on a twelve-hour flight across the world's largest ocean *sober*.

Four pints of Guinness see me through the takeoff. But thanks to my bastard liver, they don't last far beyond that. Now I've got nothing to do for the next twelve hours except obsess over every judder.

I considered booking passage on a freighter instead, but it cost too much. Now I wish I'd taken the ship. It seems like it would have been more appropriately *epic* for this kind of journey. Despite how much it scares the hell out of me, there's something so stupid and *routine* about flying. Climb into the tube, sit around bored/worried for several hours, leave the tube. *Voila*, welcome to the far side of Earth.

When the plane descends toward Auckland, the scenery makes me forget to be terrified. The greenest *green*. Fields so verdant it looks like they've been Photoshopped, the saturation bumped up so high the landscape belongs on a postcard. As we get closer, I can pick out hundreds, maybe thousands of white dots against the green. Sheep. More sheep than I've ever seen before. So yeah, I guess I *am* in New Zealand.

Monica will never know what she's missing.

Chris turns to the next page and finds another note.

I know you're sitting there judging me. I even know the image of me you've drawn: I'm an egocentric, hard-hearted, self-centred, whiny narcissist. I know that the more you read about me, the more you hate me. And I know why: the more you learn about me, the more I remind you of yourself. Did you think I was kidding when I said you were a reflection of me? Think about the parts of yourself you despise, but that you hold onto anyway because without them, you're not *you*. Now try and tell me you're in any position to judge *me*.

But those barriers are going up already, aren't they? You're already telling yourself how wrong I am. You're so sure of yourself. Confident, arrogant, righteous. You sit in judgement over my attitude toward Monica without reflecting on your own sordid history. How about how you treated your own "Monica"? For nine years you've been telling yourself leaving Megan was the right thing to do. I'll even agree with you. But don't lie to yourself about your nobility. You cloak your culpability by telling anyone who'll listen how insane she was, how she physically abused and emotionally manipulated you. You point to her whorish behaviour in the weeks following your breakup as even better evidence in your favour, but you and I both know better, don't we? You didn't decide to leave her in March, when you went down your Decision Matrix as you drove your Chevy home from St. Louis. Reaching the "breaking point" had nothing to do with it. The real reason you left her was because on Christmas Morning, when you sat in the basement of an Indiana farmhouse with her family, sipping nog and ripping open presents, when you looked at your girlfriend over a pile of shredded paper and burst-open boxes, you didn't see the woman you fell in love with six months earlier. You saw a woman who looked like someone's crazy, cat-obsessed aunt.

"How can you know all this?" you're wondering. I told you already: I created *you*. I wrote about you and Megan a decade before you ever *thought* to write about Monica and me. But in the end it doesn't matter whether I made you or you made me. You're just as superficial and egotistical as I am. And you really *are* a con artist.

That's it. I want him dead. Not to preserve myself, but to permanently silence the bastard.¹⁴ He uses truth like a weapon, and I'm tired of being his target.

Only one of us can be real. A mirror's reflection is only an image. It has no shape of its own. For one of us to be real, one of us has to be a fiction. One of us is a butterfly, dreaming he's a wasp. So one of us has to wake up. One of us has to die. But if he knows me as well as I know myself, how the hell am I going to beat him?

¹⁴ Note here that "bastard" *can* be read in its modern pejorative sense, but if you're feeling more gleefully ironic this afternoon, you can read it in the alternative archaic sense of "an illegitimate offspring" instead. Both definitions are equally valid.

HOME

I thought five years of photos, videos, and testimonials would prepare me for New Zealand. I was wrong.

Photos of Cathedral Cove didn't compare to walking through it. Reading about Rotorua's stench was a world away from having it lurking in my nostrils for days and in my clothes for a week. And after spending a day in Palmerston North (with more than one Kiwi wondering why the hell an American tourist would even bother), I wanted to take the past year of *The Adventures of the Human Race* and incinerate it. What an idiot I've been, writing about this place in such detail before even coming here. I've got a vivid imagination, but it's not enough.

I thought I'd settle in Wellington, Christchurch, Napier, maybe even Dunedin, but I've wound up in Palmerston North. When I tell people, the next thing many Kiwis ask me is, "Why?" Most of my friends hate it here. It's true, Palmy doesn't have much going for it — except some of the people here. I already knew many of them from years of online interviews seeking background info for my comic. And one of those people has become more than a friend.

I first met Aleta Wildridge two years ago on an immigration forum, where she gave advice to people interested in New Zealand. Before moving here, she lived in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, not too far from Seattle. Being Canadian, her opinion of the States was the same as mine: nice to visit once in a while, but no way in hell would she want to live there.

She's a few years younger than me, a couple of years older than Monica. The first time I came through, she helped me devise an itinerary for my trip down to the South Island, using a cocktail napkin to draw up a list of places I had to see and things I had to do. Every place she suggested was spectacular, even the more out-of-the-way spots. When I came back, the first thing I did was take her out to dinner to thank her. Once she found out I was settling in town, she helped me find a cheap flat, suggested places to find cheap furniture, and even helped me get my utilities sorted.

She and I took a trip to Kapiti Island together in late October, just as the weather was starting to turn tolerable. We rode a boat out with the island guides and about two

dozen Massey students, endured a brief speech about the island and its wildlife, then made a thousand metre climb to the summit.

Even though I'd only been in New Zealand for about five months, I'd already lost over ten kilos. In the States, I thought I was average weight for my height. Once I got to New Zealand, surrounded by fit Kiwis, I felt like a bloated, bipedal orca. The real ego killer was when I was doing a climb up Franz Josef glacier in July, wheezing my guts out, and some Kiwi bloke who had to be in his early sixties bounced past me with a grin. "Doin' all right there, mate?" he asked me. Between gusty breaths I lied and said I was. After that, I decided to get rid of the biggie-sized body I grew from years of sedate, all-American eating. The excess tonnage slid off of me like it was moulted. Last time I sent pictures home to the States, my mom didn't recognise me.

If I'd tried to do this Kapiti climb two months ago, my heart would have imploded. Aleta, used to climbs like this, wasn't even breathing hard.

We reached the summit after a two-hour climb. Below a thousand metre dropoff was the Tasman Sea, a shade of blue so bright and vivid it looked like a painting.

Aleta turned to me after half an hour on the summit and said, "I've got to tell you something, but it might sound a little weird."

"What?"

"I think I like you."

And just like that, we walked back down the mountain as a couple. I think it took us both by surprise.

There's no cordoned-off section of Palmerston North where Americans have consolidated, a cultural cyst within an otherwise pure Kiwi city. Nothing like Chinatown in San Fran or Little Italy in New York. You won't find American-themed restaurants here, unless the inescapable culinary warts of McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Domino's, Subway, and KFC count. You don't see American cultural festivals in the Square.

But Little America exists here anyway. It's a loosely-knit cadre of international students from Massey, all socialising to a weird, almost exclusionary extent. Few Kiwis run in this circle, which is a shame, but also understandable: most of the international

students are within a few years of my age, but most Kiwi students are still just kids. The North American clique has figured out how to use alcohol as a social lubricant without it becoming fuel for a post-party festival of vandalism and vomit; some of the 18-year-old Kiwi students haven't learned that lesson yet. That's one of the great ironies of living here: I moved halfway around the world to get away from Americans, but most of my friends here are fellow Americans. Go figure.

At least I've managed to find a girlfriend from a foreign country, though I'll sometimes tease Aleta that Canada's just the 51st State. She's going to visit her parents in Nanaimo for Christmas, and she wants me to come with her. As much as I was looking forward to the novelty of swimming at the beach on Christmas Day, I'd rather not have to spend a month apart from her. So we're visiting my mom in Seattle, staying with her parents for Christmas and New Years, then flying back home.

"I'm kind of dreading going back to the States," I tell her.

"Why?"

"I left for a reason. Lots of reasons. I've gotten used to things here so quickly, I'm worried that going back to the States is just going to remind me why I left."

"Why *did* you leave? You've never really told me."

I pull up *ADHR*'s archives for mid-October of 2004 and show her a comic where Chris is standing alone against a blank white background, breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience directly across four panels.

"If George W. Bush gets re-elected this November, I am leaving the United States of America. I will never come back, except to visit friends and family. I'm not kidding. I no longer feel at home in my own country, and I don't want to feel that way anymore."

I close my computer's screen and set it aside. "The morning after I posted that comic, I woke up to over 10,000 e-mails. The response was all over the place. 'Same here, I'm moving to Canada!' times a thousand. 'We don't need liberal scum like you in this country anyway,' times *two* thousand.

"I wasn't just making a political statement. I meant it. I wasn't gonna say I'd leave the country under such-and-such circumstances but then not follow through, like some of the idiot celebrities who got on *Larry King* and *Oprah* and said the same thing. I was sick of watching my country die, and I figured if America was dumb enough to let Bush spend another four years killing it, I didn't want to hang around for the aftermath."

The weird thing about Aleta: she gets turned on when I trash talk the States. If I call Americans “McDonald’s-munching garbage guts”, go off about how Republicans are trying to turn the country into Jesusland, or talk about Bush like he’s a submoron Antichrist, we end up in the bedroom. Never fails.

An hour later, right when things are getting exuberant, *SNAP*, her half of the bed collapses. She falls off me with a yelp and rolls to the floor. “What the hell happened?” she says, gasping for air.

Nothing kills the mood faster than a broken bed. In the middle of the wooden slat forming the frame, the wood’s sheared in half along the outline of a knot. “We could probably call this a manufacturer’s defect,” I tell her, “maybe try to get them to replace it.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“We’ve had this bed for a few months. They’re probably just going to hit us with the Customer Fucker.”

“The *what*?”

“The Customer Fucker. Don’t tell me you don’t have Customer Fuckers in Canada?”

She shakes her head and starts pulling on clothes.

“It’s this thing retail workers in the States carry on their belts, almost like a nightstick. When you buy a plasma TV and it craps out on you after three months, they hit you with the Customer Fucker and charge you a thousand bucks for out-of-warranty repairs. Or your computer’s warranty doesn’t cover hard drive failure, so when you lose all your music and every picture you’ve ever taken, they just shrug, say ‘I’m sorry’ without meaning it, then bop you in the face with the Customer Fucker.”

“I’ve never heard of a Customer Fucker before,” Aleta says.

“I know. I made it up.”

She sticks her tongue out at me.

“The object anyway, not the concept. I hope I’m wrong, but I bet when we take this support in to Beds R’ Us tomorrow, they’re gonna try and screw us.”

The next morning, I spend the hour before we head to the store mentally preparing myself for the battle ahead, strapping on my weapons of war, ready to unleash a torrent of obscenities at the first sign of a fake “sorry” and the Customer Fucker’s onslaught.

Aleta and I drive to Rangitikei Street, and I walk into Beds R' Us with the shards of the Bed that was Broken cradled against my chest.

Something happens that I didn't expect. The manager *helps us*. Without a single word of argument. He checks to see if they have a replacement strut, apologising the whole time like he *really means it*. He calls other stores to see if they have the part, and after finding out they don't, he offers to *custom build one* for us, *free of charge*. After taking another look at the strut, he decides it'd be a difficult job making a new one, so he orders a replacement part from Auckland instead, then apologises again when it turns out it'll take a few days to get down to us.

Aleta and I leave the store. We were only in there for fifteen minutes. I'd expected to be in there for an hour, doing retail jujitsu as I tried to fend off the parries and thrusts of the manager's Customer Fucker.

"Why are people so nice here?" I wonder as we drive back home. "Do you ever... no, you're Canadian. This probably isn't any different, is it?"

"We're not all sunshine and rainbows in B.C., you know."

"Maybe not, but sometimes I felt like I was surrounded by assholes in the States. Like people were just looking for an excuse to make you as miserable as they were. And when someone was actually nice to me, like they usually are here, I'd automatically be like, 'What do you want? *What?* Get away from me!' Chris would call it 'Shaking hands with my right hand and covering my ass with the left.'"

"*Chris would?*" she repeats. She always gets somber when I forget myself and talk about Chris like he's a real person.

"You know what I mean."

Aleta doesn't say anything. She just nods.

Chris re-reads the phrase “when I forget myself and talk about Chris like he’s a real person” seven times. He wonders if that’s the heart of the issue. As far as he knows, his Echo doesn’t even exist outside the pages of this manuscript.

But as far as you know, neither do you, a dank corner of his mind whispers.

Chris shudders, sets the manuscript aside, and checks the time. His wife will be home soon. *How am I gonna explain this to her?* “Someone I’ve never met, who hasn’t even given his name, thinks he created me. He says he controls everything I do, see, feel, think. And the scary part is: *he might be right.*”

But after seeing “Chris Rawson” typing out his existence on a Mac’s screen, the Echo became convinced that Chris had created *him*. His opening letter accused Chris of being a lazy writer,¹⁵ of only sketching the outline of a *character* rather than a fully-fledged *person*. The first chapter changed substantially in tone between “drafts”, and the Echo accused Chris of writing out the good portions of his life in favour of greater drama.

In a brief fit of over-analysis, Chris ponders the meaning in the change of titles between drafts: *Crisis* to *Chris*. *Crisis* is easy enough to decipher; it’s a ham-fisted way of introducing the “why” of the story. But *Chris* makes less sense, because the chapter isn’t really about him at all. It’s about this narrator filtering his worldview into a medium (the comic), and showing how the Echo’s interaction with that medium reflects his worldview. He sees his characters as toys of his whim, subject to his caprices, like a Greek god. It isn’t surprising he’s accused Chris of the same thing.

What if I really am just one of his characters? What if the only reason I exist is because he wrote his comic the way he did, ending his fiction by making his whole life part of the story? He dismisses the thought as soon as it comes; it sounds like something out of a fable, or a Twilight Zone episode.

I didn’t write The Last Boat out of America, but someone else did. Someone with my style, writing voice, cynical misanthropy, and experiences. The settings centre around places I know well, and the characters are

¹⁵ Guilty as charged.

archetypes from my life. Names, dispositions, and other characteristics have been altered, but I know them all.

He prepares to continue reading where he'd left off, but he sits staring at the ceiling for several minutes first.

*I didn't write this, but it reads like I did. I doubt the Echo wrote it, because it's too confessional. His style is to tell a story through people he's invented. If I didn't write it, and he didn't, then... do we both have the same problem? Is there some third guy out there, screwing with both of us?*¹⁶

He sets the manuscript aside and tries to reason things through on a blank sheet of paper.

Parallels		Differences	
Him	Me	Him	Me
<i>Adventures of the Damned Human Race</i>		Webcomic: my life as his fiction	Web column: various fictions
<i>The Last Boat out of America</i>		His life in fiction	A failed novel
Lived in Eureka, 2003-09	Lived in Eureka, 2005	Born and raised in San Diego	Never lived in San Diego
Moved to NZ, 2009	Moved to NZ, 2008	Moved here alone	Moved here with my wife
Monica	Megan	Married and divorced Monica	Dumped Megan after 9 months
Aleta	Liz	Canadian girlfriend	American wife
Best friend, Ron Corby	Best friend, Dan Gire	Ron = ex-Navy	Dan = ex-Marine
Broken bed		Broke during sex	Not sex-related
Trip to US and Canada		Late 2009	Mid 2009
"Such Great Heights" as "our song"		Divorced	Still together
"The right side is the right side"		Crashes(?)	No near misses

¹⁶ Yes. Yes there is.

Ask yourself now: if you were in his position, what would be going through your mind? Put yourself in his place. To this point you've been comfortable with the reality of your existence, but now you're facing the possibility that not only has your life been a lie, but the very fact of your existence is in jeopardy. You may be nothing more than the words on someone else's page, composed of the words that flow, letter by letter, from some distant typist's fingers. How would facing this change you? Would you be able to watch yourself in the mirror and know, without doubt, that the image staring back was really *you*, and not just a simulacrum? Or would those eyes, once so familiar to you, now belong to a stranger?

Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living. But examine it too closely, and you may see where the seams are joined together. You may find that the man behind the curtain, the great and powerful Oz, is *you*.

Are you still reading this, or are you living it?

RESURRECTION

May, 1987. San Diego.

It's hot. The tar they use to patch up cracks in the playground's asphalt is melted, oozing. I'm swirling my fingers through it, admiring the caramel texture. I get bored and wipe my hands on my shorts.

Days like this are made for roaming around in the woods with your dog. Picking berries, smearing your face blue with them, sharing them with the dog. Cooling off in the creek that runs between the brambles and trees in the empty countryside behind your house.

But I don't have a dog, and there's no woods here. No blueberries, no creek, no brambles, no trees. Just the concrete, asphalt, and steel of a military-issue playground.

Mom keeps arguing with Dad, trying to get him to move us out into the city. "You're a Gunnery Sergeant, for chrissake," she'll say. "Why the hell are we still living in base quarters like you're a Lance Corporal?"

He'll burp, crush the can in his hand, walk to the refrigerator, grab another one, open it, drink.

I know what divorce is. It means Mom and Dad will go in front of a judge on TV, like on *Divorce Court*, and after half an hour of arguing they won't be married anymore. It means Mom and me will leave San Diego, and Dad, and we'll go somewhere else and be happy.

It's too hot today. No trees means no shade means no escape from the sun, so I walk back to the house. I'm the only kid out in this heat. Everyone else is inside, with fans, with air conditioning, with ice water.

I get to our house — our squat, ugly house that I hate — and try to open the front door. It's locked. I go around to the back yard, brown grass crunching under my sneakers. The back door opens, just a crack. Cool, dry, delicious air whisks away my sweat. I try to open the door the rest of the way, *quietly*, but the *squeeEEEEEE* of the hinges gives me away every time.

Maybe he didn't hear.

I walk toward my room on tiptoe. I just want to lie on my bed, read *The Call of the Wild*, and pretend Buck is my dog. I want to sit under the cool vent, air blowing through my hair, and imagine Buck and I are in the Alaska frontier together, with no one else around for hundreds of miles. Running free.

“Thought I told you to go find something to do.”

I turn around. I look up, up, *up*, into his eyes. Hard eyes. I try to explain. “It’s too hot outside. I couldn’t find any shade.”

“Not my problem,” he says. “Go on. You’re not gonna sit in your damn room and read all day. Get out and go get some exercise.”

I’m small for my age, so Dad is always pushing me to exercise. I overheard him once, yelling at Mom, telling her all those goddamn books were going to turn the boy queer. He asked Mom if she wanted their only son to grow up to be a cocksucker.

“It’s too *hot*.”

“You’re gonna *argue* with me now? *Drop!*”

I’m on the floor, face down. Waiting.

“Up!”

Knuckles digging into the carpet, I push myself up.

“Down!”

Face first into the carpet.

“Up!”

Arms already burning. He had me do this already earlier this morning.

“Down!”

How many this time?

“Up! Down! Up! Down!”

He pauses, and I pray to anyone who’ll listen that he’s done.

“Up!”

My arms won’t work. I keep telling them to go straight, but they won’t listen.

“Get it up, boy! Do it! Now!”

Carpet fibres press into my cheek. “I can’t! I can’t breathe!”

“You’ve got enough breath left to whine! Get on your feet!”

Somehow I do. Then I see his eyes go crazy.

“What is this?” he says, grabbing my shorts. “What the fuck is *this*?” he asks, pointing at the tar.

I can’t answer. It wouldn’t matter if I could.

“Take those off,” he says. “Take *everything* off. You can’t respect the goddamn clothes we buy you, then you won’t wear any. That’s right, shoes too! Off!”

A minute later, I’m naked. Shivering. The air conditioning doesn’t feel so fine anymore.

“Now get back outside.”

I can’t move. Not like this.

“What did I just say?”

“But... I can’t. I’m-”

“You’ve got until I count ten. One. Two. Three. *Four*. Better get moving, boy. Five. Six. *MOVE, OR YOU’LL WISH YOU HAD!*”

I run. I hear him running after me, so I run faster. I can’t hear myself crying (SEVEN!), can’t hear the door squeak (EIGHT!), can’t hear the grass crunch under my bare feet (NINE!).

I keep running, out onto the street, the sidewalk, past the neighbours, the playground. I don’t know if he’s still behind me, but I don’t dare turn around to find out. Hot air blows around me, burning in my lungs. Blood runs from a stubbed toe. I run past someone’s house, and I hear muffled, adult laughter. “You forget something, son?” someone calls from their porch.

I run until an MP² pulls up next to me in his Jeep. “Get in, kid. Nobody needs to see that.”

I get in, sit down. “Here,” the MP says, handing me a blanket from the first aid kit in the back. “Cover up.” He asks me my name, who my parents are, where I live. I tell him my name, beg him to take me to my mom.

“What happened?”

“I want my mommy.” It’s all I can say, all I want.

Twenty minutes later, I’ll be at Camp Pendleton’s counselling centre, walking past curious stares to my mom’s office. I’ll walk in on her in the middle of a counselling

² MP = Military Policeman, *not* Member of Parliament.

session with a PFC only ten years older than me. Her eyes will go wide when she sees me, naked except for a blanket, with an MP guiding me. “What *happened?!?*” she’ll scream, fearing the worst. The MP will tell her he doesn’t know, that I wouldn’t say, so she’ll ask me.

And then I’ll tell her. And then Mom and Dad will go in front of a judge, but not on TV, not like on *Divorce Court*. After half an hour of arguing they won’t be married anymore. And Mom and me will leave San Diego, and Dad, and we’ll go somewhere else ~~and be happy~~.

I’ll spend the rest of my life hating him, but never able to admit it to myself. Not until the thought of spending two weeks with him forces everything else away, including which side of the road I’m supposed to drive on. There will be light, then darkness... and beyond it, a blank page.

On the morning after the flashback, I wake up to:

36 scalp stitches. Broken nose. Fractured right ulna. Dislocated right shoulder. Lacerated left tibia: 47 more stitches. Hairline fractures at the base of the skull. Grade III concussion.

“So lucky,” the doctors say.

In the ICU, I’m left to gnaw upon the brief glimpse of Wonderland I caught in the minutes following the crash, before I awoke, dazed, in the disintegrated remnants of my rented econobox.

Nothing is real. (And nothing to get hung about. Strawberry fields forever.)

Chris, my progeny, my progenitor. I made you, but now you have unmade me.

After I insisted, a nurse brought me a mirror. I don’t recognise the face staring back at me, and it has nothing to do with the beating I’ve taken. This reflection, this echo of me, is a stranger. A golem with my eyes. My body is senseless meat. My consciousness has hitched a ride on a pile of animated hamburger. And the hitchhiker himself is nothing but words on a page — or a screen. The cursor dances and spells out my life in words and phrases. A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

I've had five visitors. Mom, Aleta, and Ron took turns keeping me company, trying not to tear up at the wreck I've made of myself. Ron was the only one who managed to keep his face dry.

The fourth visitor was a Seattle traffic cop who took my statement. I didn't see any point in lying to him, inventing some phantom patch of ice. I told him, "I've been living and driving in New Zealand for the past several months." *Confusion*. "On the left," I clarified. *Understanding*. His pen darted along his notepad, left to right. Left to right.

The fifth and final visitor was from the car rental company. Because I'd purchased the additional insurance package, he assured me I wouldn't be found liable for the rental's destruction. *For now*, his shark's smile seemed to say. *Until our crack squad of Customer Fucker ninjas finds a way to make you liable*.

My doctor tells me I should still be fine to fly tomorrow. "Of course I will be," I say. "It's in the script." He gives me a smile that says, "I'm going to pretend I'm in on the joke, but really I just want to get out of this room and far away from you as I can."

All through the night, whether I'm asleep or not, I hear the insistent pounding of fingers on a keyboard.

It turns out you get royal treatment at the airport if you're in a wheelchair... from everyone except the TSA. Those minimum-wage, white-uniformed goons gathered around the metal detectors and x-ray machines force me to stand up when they find out my legs aren't broken, and they run the chair through the x-ray conveyor belt. After finding no plutonium, anthrax, or fingernail clippers hidden in the chair, they let me through.

The gate agent sees us wheeling toward her desk. I'm not sure if it's the wheelchair or the Frankenstein road show of my freshly shaved scalp, but she upgrades our seats without a word.

The drugs they put me on are *awesome*. I still feel pain, but the codeine cocktail buries it under a truckload of merino blankets. Between the drugs and my new outlook on life, courtesy of a behind-the-scenes peek at reality itself, I just don't *care*, man. Bring on your worst, Daddy-O.

Yesterday, Aleta sent him an e-mail letting him know about the crash. This is what we got back:

Oh, bullshit. I know better than to fall for that again. I'll see you on the 16th.

"What does he mean, 'again'?" Aleta asked.

"When I was sixteen, it was his year for Christmas. I didn't feel like sitting around at Camp Pendleton for two weeks listening to him yell at me, so I called and said I broke my collarbone in a car accident so I could spend Christmas with Mom instead. It actually worked, too."

"Do you hate him?"

I probably did once. But hate is for the living. For the real. And I'm neither.

You, nameless nemesis of the narrator, I know you now. You are everyone who has ever given me cause to say, "I hate." You are an amalgam, the condensed slurry of my life's most potent miseries. The ugliest traits of my own antagonists, surgically removed from their finer facets and put on a slow boil until thickened into a sewage stew.

You are clothed in the motley of my enemies. You wear the faces of people and institutions for whom rules are more important than souls. You speak in tongues no longer heard anywhere other than the echoing corridors of my memory. You smell of the desperation and fear you once inspired. I recognise you now because I recognise the parts of myself that you tortured, the bits of my psyche you spat upon, the shadowy corner of my soul that still cries out in blinded anguish at the thought of your presence. The ruined childhood, the bitter adulthood: your creation, your legacy.

Equal parts aggression and passive aggression, with never a kind word for anyone: you are my life's greatest inspiration, my most instructive mentor, a pillar erected in the centre of my mind with a bronzed inscription set below:

Do the Opposite of All that They Do, and All will be Well.

Villain with a dozen names I dare not speak aloud, I already know what lies ahead for you in the pages that will follow. Bereft of your hold over my Echo's psyche, you will lash out at random, trying to find the weak point in his defences, a last assault in the name of asserting your dominance. Following the pattern of all that's come before, I know before turning this page that your success is assured; eventually, you will knock aside his portcullis.

If I had to go through the ordeal again myself, would I sit there as I did and merely tell you that you'd said the most offensive thing anyone had ever said to me? Would another year of silence and avoidance be enough to set aside my enmity? If you were here, today, now, and said the same thing, would I let you off so easily?

I may be a con man, but even a con man has a code to follow. I followed mine that day; I kept my anger in check, and I felt the better man for it. I am not sure the Echo will be as strong as I was... for one thing, he now knows that there are no more consequences, and no escape.

Either way, I pity him for who he is about to endure.

APOTHEOSIS

“Jesus Christ!” His first words to me by the baggage carousel.

“Nice to see you, too.”

He’s sure not carved out of granite anymore. His skin sags in folds, his face more bulldog than man. Nine years out of the Corps and six years of hard drinking and hard living in Vegas have bloated his once trim waist.

He reaches out to shake my hand, sees the cast on it, stops. Then he does something I’m not expecting at all: he *hugs* me. My father has never hugged me in public before, and I have no idea how to react. Part of me wants to pat him on the back with my good arm, but I’m too stunned, and he pulls away before I get the chance.

“This is Aleta. Aleta, my dad.”

Aleta smiles. “Pleased to meet you. How was your flight?”

He avoids her gaze. “Sucked. What’s for dinner?”

So it begins. In one smooth, unbroken motion, I reach into my pocket, pull out a prescription bottle, and pop a Vicoprofen.

I expected to endure two hours of crackling, tension-filled silence during the drive from Wellington to Palmerston North. Instead, he’s more animated than I’ve ever seen him, constantly commenting on the beauty of the landscape. He doesn’t ask any questions about us or our lives here, but in the two hours between Wellington and Palmerston North, Aleta and I give him the condensed version of New Zealand’s climate, geography, and history. More words pass between my father and me in those two hours than in the rest of my life before then.

*I don’t know this man, I realise. What happened to the bastard I used to know?
Let me guess: he’s got terminal cancer, and he’s trying to make amends before he dies.*

Some discreet questions shoot that theory down. The VA hospital doctors told my father he’d live at least another twenty years.

Next day, Aleta and I show him around Massey. Neither of us know what most of the buildings are for, so Aleta tours us through the veterinary college. “I want to check

my mailbox real quick,” she says when we’re in the foyer of the vet tower, leaving my father and me free to wander.

Against one wall, there’s a map of New Zealand with pins pushed in it showing where last year’s graduates have gone to practice medicine. Next to the main map: smaller, hand-drawn maps of Australia and the States. Northeast of New Zealand is a minuscule, badly-drawn representation of the UK, no bigger than the Auckland metro area.

When Aleta wanders over and says she’s ready to go, I glance at the UK “map”, then to New Zealand. “Check it out. Sized for relative importance.” She laughs, and the three of us walk outside into the summer sun.

I’m not feeling too bad today. Leg’s sore, but manageable. My arm only hurts when I move it. The stitches in my head itch like hell, but they’re supposed to come out tomorrow. I’m even able to breathe through my nose for a few breaths at a time. I might be able to ease off the Vicoprofen soon.

My father stops walking.

“Something wrong?” Aleta asks.

He looks at me. “You wouldn’t be alive today if the USA was so ‘unimportant’. If you weren’t already laid up, I’d knock the shit out of you.”

There he is. That’s the bastard I remember. I want to be angry, but the Vicoprofen’s puffy blanket smothers the flames, and I end up amused instead. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know damn well. ‘Sized for relative importance’ my ass.”

That’s it? “First of all, I was talking about the *UK*, not the US. Second, if you’re gonna get a bug up your ass every time I say something bad about the US, this’ll be a *long* vacation.”

“If you think I’m gonna stand by silent and listen to you badmouth the country I’ve spent my whole life defending, you’re sadly mistaken.” He turns around and stomps off. I watch him recede into the distance, his back stiff.

“Should we go after him?” Aleta asks.

“No,” I say, fumbling in my pocket for another Vicoprofen, my arm and leg throbbing in time to my pulse. “Let him walk it out if he wants to act like a five-year-old.”

He's waiting for us when we get back to the car, his scowl making him look more like a bulldog than ever. He doesn't say a word when he gets in the back seat, but I can hear his blood boiling. I don't know what happened to the amiable, animated man who got off the plane in Wellington yesterday, but I wish he would come back. I almost liked that guy.

Because of my injuries, and because my father decided to come here during the busiest part of the tourist season with very little notice, there's not much we can do except sightsee. Two weeks isn't even enough time to see half of just the North Island, but we try to be the best tour guides we can be anyway.

I never know which father I'm going to wake up to. Will it be the new model, the almost giddy and entirely tolerable man who goes on a wine tour with us in Napier? The man who goes with us to several wine tastings and actually *enjoys* the Merlots and Cabernets offered to him, the same man who years ago had said, "Real men don't drink that piss"?

Or will it be the old model, the one I expected all along, the Hyde who rears his head in Taupo? After the four hour drive up there, all he wants to do is eat at Burger King. "You can eat at Burger King anywhere," I tell him. "The Whoppers down here are exactly the same as the ones where you live, I promise. Why don't we get some real food instead?"

"You're ridiculous," he says. "Gimme a break. 'Real food.' When did you turn into an elitist jackass?"

He spends an hour at Burger King (his way, right away) while Aleta and I have sushi downtown.

"I feel sorry for him," she says.

"Don't. I used to. It doesn't change anything."

A couple days later, the Sgt. Major (Ret.) stomps Rotorua flat with his response to a cashier's question, "How do you like it here so far?"

"I don't know how you people get anything done in this country," he says. "Bad enough you drive on the wrong side of the road. You can't even get any decent construction going on your highways. Two lanes and all that twisting. It's stupid.

Knock down some of them trees and get yourself some straight roads. It's ridiculous you've gotta drive three hours to go 120 miles. I can do that in about an hour and a half in the States."

"He's not with us," I tell the flabbergasted cashier. "Never seen him before. We love it here, and the roads are just fine, right, Ali?"

"Don't get me in the middle of this," she says.

Two days later in the Coromandel, we pull off at a viewpoint, get out, walk to the edge of a cliff, take in the scenery. Aleta takes a few pictures with her camera, hugs me, and says she needs to go get something from the car.

My father walks up next to me, fixes his gunsight eyes on the Pacific Ocean. I dread whatever's due to come out of his mouth next.

"Sure is pretty here," he says. "Wish I could've come here earlier. Twenty, thirty years ago, maybe..."

He's surprised me. It's the first time I've heard anything like regret coming from him. His bulldog face is twisted downward, almost like he's in pain. His back slouches, shoulders slump.

"Maybe what?"

"I could've left the Corps after Nam. Could've done something different with my life. Maybe like what you're doing right now. Maybe would've been able to make a better life for you and your mother."

The only way he could have astonished me more is if he'd dropkicked me over the cliff we're standing on.

"I don't know what to say," I tell him. "I-"

His back straightens. "Too late to do anything about it now." He turns away from the Pacific, looks back at me. "Too damn cold in this country, anyway."

At a restaurant in Coromandel Town later that night, packed with tourists from all over the world, we sit down to dinner. The babble of voices around us is in five or six different languages.

"Are you enjoying your trip so far?" Aleta asks.

"It's fine," he says, without looking at her.

Aleta never seems to give up on him. She keeps trying to like him. It amazes me. No wonder she's able to put up with me; if she can take this kind of behaviour from my father, I must seem like a Tahitian vacation. "So you were in Vietnam?" she asks.

He nods.

"Have you been anywhere else?"

His face locks onto hers like a tank turret. "Why're you wasting your time on dogs and cats? You don't wanna be a *real* doctor?"

I want to jump into this and defend her, but Aleta beats me to it. "As a veterinarian, I have to learn everything there is to know about *multiple* species. Human doctors only have to learn about *one*. So veterinary medicine is actually *harder* than human medicine."

"Sure it is. It's your story, you tell it however you want. I'm gonna hit the head."

Aleta leans over once he's gone. "If you don't kill him, I'm going to."

"I'm sorry. I tried to warn you."

"Can't we just leave him here?" She leans back in her chair and stares at the ceiling, brows knitted together in frustration. "What I don't get is why he's so nice one day, but then such an insufferable ass the next."

I glance toward the restroom, then back at her. "That's actually an improvement. I expected him to be a bastard the whole time he was here. I don't know, maybe he's mellowing out in his old age. Another ten, twenty years, he might be tolerable more than half the time."

Two days later, we spend several hours wandering through the Auckland War Memorial Museum. My idea. I figured if anything would appease him, that would. Or if not that, at least it would get him away from us long enough so we could breathe.

It's late afternoon by the time we walk outside, blinking as our eyes adjust to the sun. "What did you think?" Aleta asks. She's still trying to get on his good side, trying to appeal to the New Dad and keep Old Dad buried.

I haven't bothered to ask my father what he thinks of her, because I know what his answer would be. "She's pretty, but if you ain't gonna marry her, don't waste your time."

His opinion of the War Museum isn't much better. "Funny how this little country likes to talk up how much they 'contributed' to World War I and II, but when you get to Vietnam, they act like they're *proud* they didn't help us out."

"They did help, though," Aleta says.

"3500 troops over eight years ain't help. 3500 troops ain't shit."

He catches me rolling my eyes. "You got something to say?"

I pop a Vicoprofen. "Nope."

Now we're all in a flash restaurant in downtown Auckland. This place won a major award last year, and if the smells coming from the kitchen are anything to go by, they deserved it.

We have an appetiser of chicken livers with foie gras — the first time I've eaten either — and some whole grain bread with olive oil. The food's stratospheric. Even the bread, something you wouldn't expect to be anything special, has a sublime texture.

As good as the food is, he keeps trying to find ways to make it taste like ashes. "This place sure is full of itself," he says.

"What do you mean?" Aleta asks. "I like the décor here."

"Not this restaurant," he says. "This whole damn country. Like that museum of theirs. They're out in the middle of nowhere and they think they need a big war museum."

Kiwis at nearby tables glare at us.

"Everybody needs to remember their veterans," Aleta says. "We've got museums like that in Canada, too."

"You got a museum for all the draft dodgers you've got living up there?"

The last Vicoprofen I took is starting to wear off. My leg and arm both ache like hell, but the throbbing in my head is worse, because he's put it there. "Here's an idea. How about we just eat. How about we just enjoy our meal, *quietly*."

Dinner arrives. Aleta and I are both in raptures over our food, but my father takes a few bites of his lamb shank and sets it aside.

"No good?" Aleta asks.

"Tastes funny," he says.

“Really?” I ask. “Mind if I have a bite?”

He shrugs.

I bite down, and I have to close my eyes and savour it. Fireworks go off inside my skull. I feel like I’m tasting it with my *soul*. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. This is the best thing *ever*.”

“I’ve had better in Vegas,” he says.

Sure you have.

We eat in silence for several minutes. Aleta and I are too busy enjoying our meals to notice or react to my father, who’s sitting across from me with his arms crossed and a sour expression on his face.

“I don’t know what you see in this place,” he interjects. “It’s a thousand miles away from anywhere.”

“That’s part of what I like about it,” I say.

“That’s you, all the way. Things get rough, you chicken out and run.”

The edge of my fork digs into my palm as I clench it. “You’re right. I should follow in your footsteps and join Fat Vegas Drunks Anonymous, instead.”

His face turns to stone. “I’d rather be a busted-ass hobo in Vegas than live down here in Bumfuck, Nowhere.”

I want nothing more than to reach across the table and ram my fork into his eye so hard it comes out through the back of his head. Instead, I set it on my plate. “Good. Because if you moved down here, I honestly don’t know where I’d go next. Greenland? Easter Island? Antarctica? Where could I move to get farther away from you than I already am?”

“I don’t give a damn. You do what you want.”

“I will.” I push my chair back. “I’m going to the toilet. When I get back, maybe the decent bloke who got off the plane in Wellington will be sitting here instead of you.”

After drying off over the sink, I stare into the mirror. I can see bits of my father there, hiding under my skin. With my good hand, I wrench down on a paper towel, imagine it’s his trachea. Imagine his face going purple, capillaries exploding, eyes jutting out of their sockets.

I hear the joints in my hand creaking in protest. I throw the towel in the trash, take in a deep breath, let it out slowly.

I reach into my pocket for the Vicoprofen, take it out of my pocket, stare at the prescription label. *May cause drowsiness*, it says. *Do not operate heavy machinery*. It doesn't say anything about nightmares, but I keep having them anyway. The same one every night: *ADHR's* Chris as my puppet master, the God of my world, sitting behind a keyboard and dictating my every move when he's not busy surfing the internet, playing video games, or getting drunk. My life nothing more than the shadow of his.

I'm still staring at the bottle. The pills inside have all the answers. Open the lid, pour some into your hand. Take one, and nothing he says or does will matter for the next four to six hours. Take two, and the whole world will melt away until tomorrow. It's the only way to escape.

Except now I know there is no escape. The man behind the keyboard has made sure of that.

I put the bottle back in my pocket. No more running from him.

I return to the table, sit down, try to finish my meal. But he's finally done it; the most amazing meal of my life goes down like sawdust now.

"How did you two meet?" he asks us several minutes later, his arms still crossed.

I'm wary of his sudden curiosity, but I plunge in anyway. "She was a member of an immigration forum I was researching a couple years ago."

"Research?"

"Yeah. For my comic."

"Oh, that thing."

Oh, that thing, my brain repeats in a nasal voice. Yeah, the Vicoprofen is worn off for sure now. "She gave me a lot of good info over the years, so I dropped in on her in Palmy to thank her. Then she helped me out again, drew up a travel itinerary for my first trip across the country. It ended up being amazing. *She's* ended up being amazing," I say, leaning over toward her.

She kisses me. "You're pretty okay, too," she says, smiling. "Honestly, sometimes I don't know why you put up with me when we first met in person. I was kind of a mess."

I'm about to say something charming, but before my brain can get the words to my mouth, my father leaps in.

"Oh, he was just desperate. He just wanted to get laid."

Enough.

I push my chair back. Stand. Walk around the table.

“Get up.”

“Hey, look-”

“No. No more. Get on your feet.”

He does. Old and broken as he is, he’s still taller than me. He’s fully aware of what’s coming next. Prepared for it. By his face — his squat, ugly face that I hate — I can’t tell if he’s resigned or pleased.

I don’t care.

Every muscle in my body tenses, fires, explodes.

The left hook contacts between his temple and his jaw, deforms the skin, sends his head jerking backward. And he falls.

The sound he makes when he hits the hardwood is a symphony. 220 pounds of raw meat slapping the floor, *hard*. I stand over him for almost a minute, chest heaving, savouring the echoes of that sound. Gulping down the sight of him lying there defeated.

In this moment, I am God.

But only for that moment. Only until the adrenalin drains away and leaves me hollow. Only until the red fog in my head clears, and I find myself back at the table, sitting across from a middle-aged woman laughing at some private joke. I look for Aleta, but Aleta is gone. Liz sits in her place. *Liz*, from the *comic*, her face draped in mute shock.

I find myself mouthing the words, “You know, that might be the most offensive thing anyone has *ever* said to me.” My arm isn’t broken anymore. I no longer have stitches twisting along my scalp, my leg. The warm blanket of the Vicoprofen is burnt away, and in its place is the same rage I thought I’d spent a moment ago.

The woman across from me stops laughing. “Okay. I could go off on any of a hundred ways you’ve offended *me* on this trip.”

I feel my face twist into an angry facsimile of a smile, and I hear more words come out of me without volition. “No. Don’t. Don’t even.”

My father is gone. Aleta is gone. In their places are these two strangers, one of them ostensibly my creation. And, much like the coma-induced vision I had of Chris’s

home, I again find myself a spectator of existence. My hand shovels food into my mouth, food that I want to enjoy, but the surge of hatred I'm feeling renders it tasteless.

I back away from the table, excuse myself, head for the restroom. The door shuts behind me. I clutch both sides of the sink with all my strength as joints pop and grind in my hands. I look up.

In the mirror, an evil version of Luke Skywalker stares back at me.

I am now who I should have been all along. Not some nameless, fictional Echo, caught up in a pale imitation of the real world. I am now myself, telling my own story in my own words.

I am no con artist. I never was. That was someone else's long-ago contrived label for me, held dear and quietly nursed despite all evidence to the contrary. Here's the paradox: partially out of fear of giving offence to this person, I've fulfilled that label and crafted a narrative designed to asymptotically *approach* the truth without ever revealing it.

No more. It's time to pull back the curtain.

THIS IS THE TRUTH

I am Christopher John Rawson, born August 7, 1977 in San Luis Obispo, California.

I lived in Saudi Arabia from 1980-84. Some of my first conscious memories of that time involve watching the original Star Wars trilogy. Because I was superficially similar in appearance to a young Luke Skywalker (not yet an *evil* Luke), and because Saudi Arabia looked exactly like the desert planet of Tatooine, it wasn't until about age six that I realised the universe depicted in Star Wars wasn't how things are in the real world. I've spent most of the years since trying to get over the disappointment.

I wanted for nothing before my parents divorced in 1987. After the divorce, my mother and I spent the next eight years in abject poverty. Directly correlative: I lived in almost twenty different houses before graduating from high school. Also possibly correlative: I was a loner with few friends, and I got into more fistfights than I can even remember.

I joined the Navy in 1995 to earn money to pay for college. From 1996-97 I went through Naval Nuclear Propulsion Training, where I excelled in what's regarded as one of the most challenging academic programmes anywhere. I then spent a year on the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Carl Vinson* as a nuclear-rated electrician's mate. I didn't fit in well with Navy culture, and I suffered a series of emotional breakdowns in 1998. I became physically debilitated via chronic injuries suffered due to congenital *pes cavus* foot deformity, and I was honourably discharged from the Navy in 1999 — not because the Navy was bad for *me*, but because in an effort to salvage what little remaining psychological and physiological health I had remaining, I did a very thorough job of convincing the Navy that I was bad for *it*.

I worked as a health physics technician from 1999-2000, doing contamination surveys on radioactive waste and getting paid more money than I'd ever seen. For the first time since my parents' divorce, I wanted for nothing... except *companionship* (if I may employ a euphemism), which was nowhere to be found. Possibly in relation to that deficiency, I drank heavily every weekend, and I regularly had to have my best friend

explain to me on Sunday morning/afternoon what I'd done Saturday night, because I'd blacked out and woken up on a floor somewhere with several hours of my life *gone*.

I met my first serious girlfriend on the internet in mid-2000 (years before it was no longer socially emasculating to admit such a thing publicly), then moved from eastern Washington State to southern Illinois to live with her. Nine months later, after she turned out to be a "psycho hosebeast", I moved back to Washington and decided to stop treading water and get down to the Serious Business of Improving Myself.

From 2001-03, I attended Columbia Basin Community College. I switched from a science-focused major (with an astrophysics degree as an ultimate goal) to an English major after finding out that math is hard.

I met my second serious girlfriend (Liz) on the internet in 2001 (because I didn't learn my lesson the first time) and moved to Cleveland, Ohio to live with her in early 2003. While attending Kent State University, I worked various menial jobs (waiter, cook, pizza store shift manager, etc.) to earn money (and not a whole lot of it).

I proposed to Liz, an ex-model who is six inches taller than me, in late 2003. For some reason, she said yes.

I started writing a novel in early 2004. I didn't know that I'd started writing a novel; I thought I was writing an assignment for a Young Adult Literature course.

After discovering I hated living in Ohio, Liz and I moved to San Bernardino, California in mid-2004. A couple months later, after Bush got re-elected, we decided to move to New Zealand — not "someday" but "as soon as humanly feasible".

A university registration debacle forced both of us to drop out of school four months after moving to San Bernardino, and because of money problems we had to abandon our apartment and move in with friends in Eureka, about 700 miles north. We lived with those friends for the first seven months of 2005, then left for Las Vegas after an explosive falling-out with the homeowner.

Liz and I married in Las Vegas in August, 2005. We moved back to Cleveland a few days later.

From 2005-06, I worked various humdrum jobs (electronics salesman at Sears, security guard at Target) to support Liz while she pursued a biology degree. I drank heavily almost every day in an attempt to cope with living in Cleveland again.

I finished the first draft of my first novel in December 2005. As of this writing, I have yet to sell it to anyone, primarily for lack of trying.

I returned to Kent State University in August, 2006. I graduated *summa cum laude* in mid-2007 with a Bachelor's degree in English.

I worked as an editor at PR Newswire in Cleveland from mid-2007 to mid-2008 — the best job I've ever had, bringing in the most disposable income I've seen since before my parents divorced.

Liz and I moved to Palmerston North, New Zealand on July 3, 2008. I entered the Master's programme at Massey University in early 2009 and was awarded the Masterate Scholarship later that year. I began my Master's thesis in early 2010.

I think this is about where we came in.

My life reads like a lunatic's version of a résumé. If I'm just a character in someone else's story, the author's going to have to explain the narrative *point* of having me go from being a downtrodden, poverty-stricken, teenaged loner to a nuclear-rated Naval electrician, then a glorified garbageman in a radioactive waste dump, then hopscotching across the country trying to find a woman who'd put up with me for more than a few months (and vice versa), then switching from a degree in astrophysics to a degree in English, then all that "Now I'm in Cleveland, now I'm not" business, and the most unrealistic part of the whole story: moving to the other side of the world, essentially on a whim. How is anybody supposed to *buy* that story? I *lived it* and I don't believe it!

The "plot" of my life doesn't follow any coherent path. An author's supposed to move the plot along and *build* toward something, right? What has my life been building toward so far? The entire basis of my existence changes every five years. Will someone reading my life story will be able to follow the trail between *Chris Rawson 1997*: nuclear electrician on an American aircraft carrier, and *Chris Rawson 2010*: English Masterate candidate in New Zealand, and have it make any kind of logical sense?

All these marvellous details, all these intriguing twists and turns in the story of my life, what are they *for*? Is there any kind of *message* buried in this train wreck? And

don't give me that hipsterish postmodern line of logic, "No man, you don't get it... like, the whole point is that there *is* no point, dude. Whoa."

The Last Boat out of America exists because "Chris Rawson" came to the same conclusion I did: his life isn't coherent enough to cut it as a narrative. And he decided it wasn't *dramatic* enough either; the initial chapter's first draft, "Crisis", is much closer to the truth than anything that follows. I've never been divorced. I came to New Zealand from Cleveland (by way of Las Vegas), not Eureka. My dad isn't anything like what's portrayed in here; the character is a "condensed slurry of my life's most potent miseries". As over-the-top as he may seem, about half of this father character's behaviour and words are completely true. If anything, he's a more "humane" version of the people he's based on; like so much else in my life, if I wrote things down 100 percent as they happened, no one would believe it.

When I began my Master's thesis, it was going to be a semi-fictional account of what it's been like moving to New Zealand. How my wife and I adjusted to living in a culture that's familiar enough to be comfortable, but foreign enough that we still feel like outsiders a lot of the time, and how that contrasts with what I saw as the "typical" immigrant experience. The hook of this initial approach was going to be the idea that unlike other immigrant writers, who have usually been immigrants from non-Western societies reflecting on how they adjusted (or failed to adjust) to living in a Western nation, I was moving from one Western society to another, and as long as I kept my mouth shut, I was perfectly capable of blending in. Was I planning on writing a story about some guy who hates his father and divorces his wife so he can move to New Zealand, then ends up questioning the very fabric of his existence? No. Not even close.

This Echo assumed everything that happened in my world was a reflection of his. My fights with Liz happened because he fought with his ex-wife. I decided to move to New Zealand because *he* decided to move here. I had the Vacation from Hell in 2009 because *he* had the Vacation from Hell with his dad. But *he* doesn't even exist. He's nothing but a faceless id. He dreamt of an über-Chris Rawson, one whose pounding laptop keys had formed his existence, letter by letter. During his episode of unconsciousness, the Echo visited my real home and witnessed "Chris" at work, even to the point of witnessing "these words, written here, [...] the ones you watch being formed as the cursor dances, left to right."

Outside of the context of *The Last Boat out of America* itself, the Echo felt victimised by someone he *called* Chris Rawson, someone he accused of revising portions of his life until the Echo no longer knew what was real and what wasn't. The Echo didn't see the irony of his situation: he was doing the same thing to another "Chris Rawson" in *The Adventures of the Damned Human Race*. The author was the product of the authored.

I keep catching myself talking about this Echo as though he's a real person with real motivations. But in many ways, Hamlet is "realer" than Shakespeare; the Echo is "real" in the same sense. It must be my background in literary criticism and psychology getting in my way. I've got my hammer, so everything looks like nails. In the end, *The Last Boat out of America* is like any other narrative: it's the owner's manual to the main character's soul.

But if he's just an echo of me, or of "Chris Rawson", does that mean it's the owner's manual to *my* soul, too? That's precisely what I was trying to avoid, dear reader, and why I had to make you jump through so many narrative hoops. I wanted you to know my *story*, but I had to keep my *self* hidden. The "Chris Rawson" who found a plain brown box in his lounge is no more real than the Echo was. The same puppetmaster made them both, and for the same purpose: to *reflect* the truth. To show the *image* of reality, without showing reality itself.

If you've read this far, you're probably wondering what point I'm trying to make. Let's go back to the handwritten letter that started it all. Addressed with a threat: "I am going to kill you, Chris Rawson."

This letter and this manuscript were never meant for the Chris Rawson of *Infinite Regress*. They were meant for the über-Chris, the one who *really* wrote *The Last Boat out of America*, the one responsible for pitting that story's protagonist (the Echo) and a proxy of himself ("Chris Rawson") against each other. Über-Chris is the one behind it all. He's the one sitting behind his MacBook Pro's keyboard with a perpetually stern, focused expression, the one trying to focus on pounding the keys rather than doing something else. He's the true Chris, the one who shows himself only in fleeting glimpses in this prose. The architect of three universes:

1. *The Adventures of the Damned Human Race* is the truth. Everything that happens in the comic happened in real life.

2. *The Last Boat out of America* is mostly fictional. I could go through and annotate everything that's true versus everything that's made-up, but sometimes the line between the two isn't so clear, even to me.

3. *Infinite Regress* is as real or fictional as you want it to be. After a year spent twisting this story into a Möbius strip, the difference between creating *Infinite Regress* and living it doesn't seem as definite as it might have at the beginning. Creating the story in this fashion has caused me to question fundamental assumptions I've made about reality; in other words, the idea that the stuff bouncing off my retinas, eardrums, and skin is truly representative of *reality* is one I no longer find so comfortably accessible. I've always been an existentialist, and this process certainly hasn't helped cure me of it.

I'm not supposed to be doing what I'm doing right now, by the way — showing you the scaffolding of the story instead of its scrubbed-clean façade. In 2011 I can get away with writing this way, when an editor from 1911 would have thrown this manuscript in the nearest fireplace. That's because Joseph Campbell ruined it for everybody. Once he stripped Western Literature down to its atoms, describing a story as “formulaic” became an insult. I could have written a straightforward memoir, but to adapt my real life with all its illogical twists and turns into a standardised dramatic arc would have been formulaic in the extreme.

Writing *Infinite Regress* the way I have allowed me to retain at least the *illusion* of originality. But the truth is, *Infinite Regress* is nothing more than the sum of its influences. It's all a rip-off of Chuck Palahniuk, David Foster Wallace, Philip Roth, Italo Calvino, portions of Tatsuya Ishida's *Sinfest* webcomic, and of all things, *a Daffy Duck cartoon*. Seriously. Go to YouTube and search for “Duck Amuck”. The parallels are pretty astonishing. I hadn't seen that cartoon in probably 20 years, but upon seeing it again after writing the penultimate draft of *Infinite Regress*, I turned to my wife and said, “Wow. That seven-minute cartoon is basically my entire Master's thesis.”

This is the part where I'm supposed to wrap everything up neatly and trim away all the loose threads, so you feel like you've left this story with some sense of enlightenment. After all, that's the purpose of literature isn't it, “to teach and delight”? But if I just *hand* you all the answers, it's no better than looking at the back of a math book for the solution to the problem before you've begun working your way through it.

I'll give you one answer for free: *Infinite Regress* is the closest thing to an autobiography that I'm likely to write. If you want the "moral" of the story, that's it... and this is all the truth you're ever going to get out of me.

ONE LAST THING

Experienced writers often tell beginners, “Write what you know.” I think this is terrible advice. Most people don’t really *know* a damned thing. Too often there’s a titanic gulf between what people “know” and what *is*. All writers, whether amateurs or laureates, are far better off writing about what they *learn* than what they “know”.

What you “know” about me is only what I’ve written, and a fair amount of it is no more truthful than any typical fiction. I’ve avoided writing a standard memoir partially because I don’t want you, estranged reader, to “know” me too well. But it’s also because someone in my own life already “knows” who I am. This person has written my story already. In that story, I really am a con man, an amoral swindler looking out for number one, exactly as I portrayed myself at the very beginning of *Infinite Regress*.

Nothing I do will ever be good enough for this person, and nothing I say will ever convince the author of *Chris Rawson: Shiftless Drifter* to edit the narrative and paint over those villainous colours. I don’t know why, but I’ve also stopped caring.

I’ve put the world’s largest ocean between myself and the United States for reasons that should be abundantly clear by now. It’s not at all coincidental that the same ocean separates me from my would-be biographer, who created yet another fictitious Chris Rawson to throw on the pile.

Here’s my last word to the author of that tale:

Hello. I don’t know if you’ve made it this far, or if you’ve bothered reading this at all. As you read, I’m sure you recognised bits of yourself in here. I’m just as sure that you’re good and riled about the way I’ve portrayed you. Well, tough. You may not be a drunken, foul-mouthed, ex-Marine sniper... but you know exactly which bits of you are *really* in here. Which has got you angrier, the parts I made up, or the parts that are true?

I never named you. I didn’t show anyone *you*, the way I “know” you. Your secret is still safe with me. But let this be a lesson: the blank page is my canvas, and I paint with words. Never show a painter your true colours unless you want the world to stare at them forever.

Infinite Regress: Metafictional Memoir

Introduction

At first, the novella portion of this thesis was a fictionalised portrayal of my recent immigration to New Zealand and the challenges my wife and I faced in adapting to life here after living in the United States. I knew before I even began writing that, for a variety of reasons, certain episodes from my life could not be rendered factually; therefore, I created a fictionalised account rather than a straightforward memoir. However, at the outset of the project I found I needed to get my own story “out of the way” before I could commit to writing a fictionalised version of it, so I started by writing down the events surrounding my immigration without holding anything back.

Then, my wife read it. “You can’t write about me like that,” she said. “You made me sound stupid. If people read that, they’re gonna think I’m an idiot.” This was precisely the sort of reaction I was trying to avoid, so it was clearer than ever that to tell this story and get my point across I would have to fictionalise it. But I faced a problem: I didn’t want to go so far into fictionalising that I lost the point of my story in someone else’s. I still wanted the “authenticity” of a memoir in the narrative, but I didn’t want to be *entirely* revelatory of my own truth either—not just because of my wife’s prohibitions, but also because of my own inhibitions. Despite my creative aspirations, there are things about my life I do not want the world to know. This made a straightforward memoir something I felt I had to avoid.

In *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, Thomas Larson notes that many potential memoir writers experience this difficulty: “Anyone who wants to tell the truth soon learns that the truth may not want to be told” (33). This was true for me not only because I wanted to withhold private matters from a public audience, but also because I felt my true experiences wouldn’t make a compelling read. Pages upon pages of pontificating about my reasons for leaving the US came off as excessively preachy in an traditional memoir format. I also realised that attempting to adapt my life into a standardised plot arc was futile. This is not to say my life has not had its dramas (for it most certainly *has*), but when trying to find what Stephen King calls the “through-line” of life (*On Writing* 1), I found there really wasn’t one. The “Chris Rawson” of 1995

bears almost no resemblance to the “Chris Rawson” of 2000, 2005, or 2010, and without a *full* accounting of all the events between, the changes in my life’s narrative make no coherent, logical sense.

Autobiographies adapt an entire life into a very scripted format, and for me to do the same would have been far beyond the scope of what I was trying to accomplish. By focusing only on my post-immigration experiences and paring an unwieldy autobiography down to a more manageable memoir format, I thought I could manage these narrative difficulties, but another sprang up in its stead: my post-immigration life has, at least so far, been remarkably drama-free. Adjusting to life in New Zealand has not been especially difficult for me, and while I could probably make an interesting 4000 word essay out of that, a 28,000-plus word novella with no particularly driving *drama* behind it is too much for most readers to bear.

The issues I faced: how could I tell a true story without telling *all* of the truth? How much could I omit or alter? How could I present true events realistically without giving too much of *myself* away? And how could I accomplish all of this without falling into the same trap that James Frey did in *A Million Little Pieces*: presenting fiction as autobiographical truth, and betraying readers’ trust? The only truly dramatic events in my life experiences after moving to New Zealand were events that, for personal reasons, I could not present factually. I also didn’t feel as though I could fictionalise these events without making them excessively inauthentic, which left me with the possibility of writing an entire novella without any dramatic tension at all.

Having read Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* many years earlier, I knew I was not the first author to face this difficulty. In his short story collection, O’Brien distinguishes between what he calls “happening-truth” and “story-truth.” Specifically, O’Brien argues that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.” “Happening truth” is just that: the events that actually occurred, factual as entries in a historical database. O’Brien gives an example: “I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.”¹⁷

¹⁷ All O’Brien citations are from an electronic edition of the text. Page numbers do not appear in citations of *The Things They Carried* because the electronic edition had unreliable pagination, and I could not locate a hard copy.

“Story truth” is what happens when actual persons, places, and events are adapted to suit the narrative form, providing a more visceral sense of the experience or more effectively conveying a larger truth about the experience than bare facts could. O’Brien also gives an example of story truth: “He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.” This descriptive passage is story truth because both O’Brien’s description of the dead soldier and his assertion that he killed him are authorial inventions, yet they serve an illustrative narrative purpose: driving home the horrors of the Vietnam conflict in a way that clinical, factual description could not.

O’Brien’s solution to the dilemma of dramatising real events without betraying readers trust was to *explicitly draw the reader’s attention* to the dichotomy between happening truth and story truth. This technique simultaneously lays bare the fictional aspect to *The Things They Carried* and, perhaps paradoxically, enhances the text’s realism. O’Brien plainly states his intent in the text: “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.” By admitting to readers that the text contains fictional elements, O’Brien has written neither a memoir nor a fiction, but a metafiction.

Larson writes that “metanarrating may be the only way a memoir can get written if the memoir’s self-awakened subject is *how do I write one*” (95). This was true not only for O’Brien’s text, but for my own as well. Once I realised I could not satisfactorily reconcile my desire to tell my true story with the reality that, as Larson says, “the truth may not want to be told,” I decided to use metafictional techniques to make the central conflict of my memoir *the creation of the story itself*. This tension between reality and fiction is now explicit in *Infinite Regress*, via the use of metafiction.

After writing a metafictional memoir myself and reading extensively on the decisions facing memoir writers, I have concluded that, as Larson says, use of metafiction may be the only means for memoir writers to write *honestly* about their lives if they intend to deliberately conceal or alter *vital* narrative information from their readers. I will address what I mean by writing *honestly* and what counts as *vital* narrative information by analysing several authors whose works reside along a “continuum” of metafiction.

James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* is not intratextually metafictional, with the exception of the brief author's note added in editions subsequent to the controversy surrounding revelations of Frey's falsification of key portions of the narrative, but it invites an *extratextually* metafictional reading when one approaches the work fully aware that portions of this supposedly "true story" were fabricated. Stephen King's memoir, *On Writing*, is also not explicitly metafictional, but his insertion of a character named "Stephen King" into the final two novels of the *Dark Tower* cycle is; the differences in his factual and fictional accounts of the traffic accident that nearly killed him are demonstrative of the commonalities between memoir and metafiction, and how the two different "genres" can be linked. Finally, Philip Roth, who has built much of his career around semi-autobiographical characters like Nathan Zuckerman, uses metafiction in his "autobiography" (more properly labelled a memoir) *The Facts* to show the problems that arise when a fiction writer attempts to be truthful about highly subjective events, especially his own life.

In the analysis that follows, I will examine Stephen King's memoir *On Writing* as a typical example of the memoir genre and show how readers approach this genre with a different attitude than when reading fiction. In contrast to the suspension of disbelief that occurs during fiction reading, I argue that instead the reader's *incredulity* is suspended while reading a memoir. This key difference in the reader's approach to the genre can lead to readers feeling betrayed when a memoir is revealed to be untruthful; I will use *A Million Little Pieces* as an example of the precarious ground authors will find themselves upon if they choose to fictionalise within a genre where readers generally expect no such thing. I will then examine how O'Brien uses metafictional techniques in *The Things They Carried* and how those techniques (potentially) prevent readers from experiencing the same sense of betrayal as they read his work, even though much of it is fictionalised.

Following that, I will focus in particular on the metafictional technique of infinite regression and show how both Philip Roth and Stephen King use the technique to render indistinct the boundary between author and authored. This technique proved to be central to my writing of *Infinite Regress* (hence its title), and an examination of how these authors used infinite regression clarifies my reasons for using the technique in my own fiction.

Finally, I will conclude that “layering” metafiction over a memoir does not ultimately resolve the problematics of the genre when questing for narrative “truth”. Metafiction instead deliberately calls attention to these problems in a manner that may provoke a negative reader response unless handled guilefully. Because this adds the potential pitfalls of metafiction to the already mine-laden genre of memoir, I will argue that an author should only employ the technique if the sole alternative is not telling the tale at all.

Characteristics of Memoir

In order to examine memoir as a “genre”, we must first examine its common characteristics and identify memoir by what it is *not*. “Memoir is not autobiography—a recounting of linear events from birth to death—but rather a *selected* aspect of a life” (Murdock 120). In autobiography, “The life is prior to the writing” (Larson 77), and the writing itself is “indiscriminate” rather than “selective” as in a memoir (Larson 2). Autobiography emphasises *summary* rather than close examination of life events; the genre “generally avoid[s] introspection and scenic drama and, instead, summarize[s] the significant people and events in the author's life (Larson 12). Autobiographies examine a past that is “over and done with and *here it is*” (Larson 61) and a self that is “a consequence of one's deeds”, while memoirs instead “present the self as a person disclosing the mutability of the self” (Larson 169).

In other words, if I write a narrative of at least novel-length, chronologically progressing from my birth to February 2011 and giving an overview of key life events, emphasising how those events have shaped me into the *successful* person I am today (Folkenflik 224), that is an autobiography. If I instead write a narrative concentrating on my experiences from 2008 to today, focusing on immigrating to New Zealand and going into great personal detail about the effect it had on my family and me, that is a memoir rather than an autobiography.

The generic conventions of memoir make it a genre prone to a great deal of authorial subjectivity. Memoir writer and critic Maureen Murdock notes that “for a piece of writing to be called a memoir it must include self-reflection” (119), and critic Jerome Bruner notes this takes form in “a narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name, there and then” (44-5). Memoir’s analytical approach to the self shows how the self can be *split* between the *authorial* self and the *narrative* self—a characteristic which memoir and metafiction have in common. Critic Robert Folkenflik notes that such writing makes a “distinction between the ‘I’ who is talking and the figure in the past who is described,” and that the narrative “take[s] shape as a way of dealing with the otherness of the figure in the past” (234). This introspection is a “prime stylistic distinction” of memoir and “a give-and-take between narration and analysis, one that directs the memoirist to both show and tell” (Larson 23). Memoirists’ identification of this split between selves “is both an assertion of difference

and an assertion of identity” (Folkenflik 234) done for a specific purpose: to “connect the past self to — and *within* — the present writer as the means of getting at the truth of his identity” (Larson 24).

Murdock notes that there are “elements found in most memoirs: remembered event, universal theme, relational style, emotional truth, intimacy, humor and self-reflection” (120). Remembered events, emotional truth, and self-reflection are all highly subjective and prone to distortion, which problematises the idea of “truth” in memoir. However, despite their highly subjective nature, most readers will approach a memoir as a true story from the outset because “[a]cts of story-telling are individuated not just by story-tellers but by the mode of telling” (Lamarque 93), and the reader’s response to a memoir is a critical facet of the genre.

Linda Hutcheon notes that readers’ genre expectations “determine the validity and even the status of the novel's reality” rather than “the subject matter or any supposedly real referents,” and she further writes

There does seem to be a difference in the reader's imaginative process, an increase in the active element of that experience, if the referents are acknowledged as fictive—by the word ‘novel’ on the book's cover, or even more overtly, through narcissistic thematization [metafiction].

(*Narcissistic Narrative* 97)

The reverse is also true; if a reader approaches a work labelled as an autobiography or memoir, that reader will accept the work as a true story, oftentimes regardless of its contents. Stephen King is primarily a novelist, but the full title of King’s memoir, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, alerts a reader to its status as a memoir, written to a different standard and with a different set of rules than King’s fiction. Before reading any of the novels in King’s *Dark Tower* saga, a reader knows the books are fictional. Worlds populated with fantastic monsters, doorways between dimensions, and death-dealing characters like the eponymous Gunslinger require the reader’s suspension of disbelief. With *On Writing*, as with all autobiographies, memoirs, and journals, something else happens instead: rather than suspension of disbelief, the reader undertakes a suspension of *incredulity*. At first suspension of disbelief and suspension of incredulity may appear to be identical, but the key difference between them is the duration of suspension.

While reading *The Gunslinger*, readers accept Mid-World, Roland, and the events of the novel as real. Hutcheon notes, “As a reader begins a novel, [...] words take on a unity of reference and create a self-contained universe that is its own validity (and ‘truth’)” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 88), and the “author’s guiding rhetoric”, “narrator’s mediation”, and “accumulation of fictive referents” work together to “force [the reader] to bridge the gap between his own world and the potential fictional universe” (140). However, after finishing a novel, a reader will put it down, drag himself out of that fictional world, and accept that nothing which happened within those pages ever *really* happened.

While reading *On Writing*, readers accept King’s account of his childhood as real, and they accept the world he’s created within its pages just as easily as they accept Mid-World in *The Dark Tower* saga. After finishing King’s memoir, a reader will put it down, and it’s here that the mental process differs significantly: even after putting *On Writing* back on its shelf, *the reader continues to believe in the memoir’s reality*.

Because of this suspension of incredulity, memoirs must be manufactured in a manner that maintains the reader’s trust. Larson notes that “while the fiction reader is supposed to trust the tale more than the teller, that adage doesn’t fit memoir” (153), and Murdock writes, “The reader has the right to expect that what you claim to be true will be accurate to the best of your recollection. Remember, memoir is about honesty, not about how you appear to others” (Murdock 147-8). In other words, in order to maintain a memoir’s status as non-fiction, to maintain the reader-narrator/author bond, and to ensure that suspension of incredulity remains intact, authors must not violate the reader’s trust by *deliberately* falsifying aspects of their memoirs. Authors who do violate their readers’ trust in this manner face very dire consequences.

Truth and Lies in Memoir

Memoirist William Zinsser notes that “to write a memoir you must manufacture a text. You must construct a narrative so compelling that readers will want to keep reading” (163). The key word here is *manufacture*: a memoir, like any other text, is something which the author *constructs*, but the method of construction in memoir differs from fiction. Fiction writers must craft a world that readers can imagine, but they need only craft the world’s foundations; “Readers ‘fill in’, or just take for granted, an enormous amount of detail which is not explicitly given” (Lamarque 89).

Memoirists instead focus on crafting a bond with readers by crafting a personality (presumably the author’s own) within the text that readers can identify with, and they do this through “literary style and passion for the telling” that “draws in” readers by “personal engagement” (Morley 177). “Writers of creative nonfiction try to close that distance between reader and writer while also dealing in the factual” (Morley 178).

Although we conventionally regard memoir as non-fiction, memoirists are still *telling stories*. Zinsser writes that “mere facts aren’t enough. No matter how many details you diligently collect about the people and places and events in your past, they won’t add up to a memoir. You must make a narrative arrangement” (162). Larson makes a similar point when he writes, “Memoir is related to fiction because memoir, like fiction, is a narrative art” (25), and Bruner says it is “an extension of fiction” because “the shape of life comes first from imagination rather than from experience” (55). John Sturrock notes that “a human life can be brought to display a meaning only on condition of being turned into a story” (20), and this is essentially what memoir does: it assigns *meaning* to a life (and perhaps “life in general”) by rendering that life in a narrative.

However, saying that memoir is *related* to fiction because it shares certain narrative conventions is *not* the same as saying memoir is inherently fictional. Larson notes, “Fiction is not designed to push you toward the personal truths of your life. Fiction was *never* designed for that. Fiction equals persona, which suggests theater, which implies myth” (105). He further argues that “we deprive memoir of its singular character if we lump it into fiction simply because we know that any personal narrative has irremediable fictional traits” (108). One aspect of that “singular character” is truth, because although “a memoir is not simply a factual retelling of your life” like an

autobiography (Murdock 120), memoir writing “conducts, reflects and transforms. That does not mean that it lies. Indeed, it often clarifies” (Morley 187).

This definition of truth does not necessarily equate it with absolute accuracy. According to Murdock, the purpose of memoir is “to find one's truth, not to determine the accuracy of what happened [...] the memoirist, instead, both recounts an event and muses upon it” (12). This is precisely what Stephen King does in *On Writing*, but first he acknowledges the fallibility of his memory by admitting that his childhood is “a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees” (1). With this early admission, King echoes Murdock’s assertion that “Memoir is not history. It's an attempt by the author to narrate her memories with the greatest emotional truth she can muster. That probably means that not every fact is completely accurate” (147). “This is not an autobiography,” King insists (correctly—*On Writing* is a memoir). “[D]on’t look for a through-line. There are *no* lines—only snapshots, most out of focus” (1). In the memoir that follows, King tells his *story*: early memories, sketches of his childhood, the various events that inspired him to become a writer, often looking back upon occurrences that are decades past.

Morley notes that “Writing a memoir engages both memory and memory's natural selectiveness” (183), and that “memory is dynamic and selective; it can delete whole days, or magnify everyday happenings so that they become mythic” (184). This is particularly true in King’s memoir; he has very clear memories of certain events, but only outlines of others. Because of the way memory tends to react to trauma, King has vivid memories of the worst parts of his life and is adept at describing traumatic events in excruciating detail; an account of wiping himself with poison ivy during the second grade is particularly intense (10). On the whole, however, King’s memoir is as fragmentary as one might expect it to be when an author tries to recall details from nearly half a century before.

Despite King’s claim that there is no through-line to *On Writing*, the line is very much apparent, and it shows that fallibility of memory is not the only factor at work in shaping a memoir’s “truth”. Sturrock notes that memoir’s content comes about “not simply because such has been the writer's experience and he therefore had no option but to include it, but because this is his past as he has chosen to project it” (287). In King’s memoir (and, by extension, memoir in general), King is not only acting as storyteller,

he's also acting as *editor* by giving readers only the events important to his message. Murdock says "*Being willing to leave things out is vital*" (120), and Zinsser parallels that sentiment by saying, "Only small pieces of life make an interesting memoir" (29). King has adapted the "out of focus snapshots" of his earlier years to suit the story he's trying to tell: the life experiences that convinced him to become a writer, his early efforts in the craft, his unexpected and sudden success, the battle with alcoholism that nearly ended his career and his life. There's very little in the first 38 pages of his memoir that's extraneous to his message, which is essentially, "This is how I became *the* Stephen King." Later in *On Writing*, King fully admits the memoir portion of the book is his attempt "to show some of the incidents and life-situations which made me into the sort of writer I turned out to be," which proves that even though he set out writing the book insisting there was no "through-line" to the narrative, it exists nonetheless.

In sum, memoir is heavily dependent on the author's memory, which is highly prone to inaccuracy. But so long as the memoirist makes an honest attempt at representing the truth of his memory, he is still adhering to the spirit of O'Brien's happening truth. Although memoirs are subject to narrative "shaping" via omission of extraneous detail, this does not mean a memoirist lies if he doesn't include descriptions of every meal, trip to the grocery store, or shower during the period he writes about. But the more writers shape their narratives, the stronger the temptation to exaggerate or invent may become.

Memoirists tend to cast themselves as the heroes (or at least the protagonists) of their own stories, with antagonistic forces to overcome. These can be external factors like poverty, family troubles, or war; alternatively, they can be internal factors like mental illness or drug addiction. Zinsser writes that "You are the central actor in your story, and you must give yourself a plot" (163), and it is indeed necessary to create one, whether it's in service to didacticism or simply out of concern for readability. Typical readers will come into an autobiographical text with at least a subconscious understanding of the aspects of a traditional dramatic plot arc—exposition, rising action, climax, denouement—and they may expect the same pattern to underlie memoirs even though real life hardly ever follows this arc. It's in *plotting* that memoir's truth is most subject to being undermined.

The effect is even more powerful when relating traumatic events. According to critic Robin Silbergleid, “As readers, we tend to assume that if it’s traumatic, it must be true” (152). This effect is pronounced across the entire genre of autobiographical texts; no memoir is more poignant or “true” than the story of an author who faces adversity (either externally or self-inflicted), faces up to it, and triumphs. These stories appeal to our sense of myth and draw from the same storehouse of archetypes as Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (23). Murdock notes that “male autobiography has typically taken the form of the mythic hero based on the Greek ideal of heroism [...] Eventually, unless the hero has displeased the gods, he achieves his goal” (35). In autobiographical texts, including memoirs, the hero is the autobiographer; the supernatural region is the autobiographer’s traumatic expulsion and estrangement from what he considers normal, everyday life; the fabulous forces the autobiographer encounters are the calamities and/or internal/external modifiers preventing the autobiographer’s return to normalcy; and the boon the autobiographer bestows on his fellow man is the autobiography itself, a cautionary/inspirational tale of trials faced and overcome. Murdock elaborates on the link between mythic storytelling and modern memoirs:

Myths use symbols and gods and goddesses to explore such themes as heroism, betrayal, the search for the mother or the father, love and the cycles of death and rebirth. Memoirs explore the very same themes in the stories of everyday lives. Memoirists are our contemporary mythmakers. (24)

Didacticism via the relation of personal trauma is not a new phenomenon; Dante’s *Divine Comedy* shares characteristics with modern autobiographical texts. We see a fictionalised Dante Alighieri descend into the depths of Hell itself (populated with many of Dante’s real-world 13th century Italian adversaries); eventually, after travelling to the very centre of Hell, Dante climbs the Tower of Purgatory and ascends into Heaven, all the way to the feet of God Himself. Dante’s poetic journey to enlightenment parallels that of modern autobiographies, with memoirists descending into their own personal

Infernos, then coming out the other side as cleaner, “wiser” men prepared to share their lessons with us.

When trying to tell a compelling story in a tragic mode, authors may be tempted to exaggerate the impact of events for dramatic effect, or in extreme cases, even invent an “alternate version” of themselves in order to craft an autobiography that fits into this mythic-didactic mode. While adapting real life into a narrative form is always going to involve some measure of “story truth”, the more authors’ motivations for inserting “story truth” into autobiography veer away from basic considerations of plotting, the farther from the territory of non-fiction these authors tread. This becomes problematic when the author is *deliberately* misrepresenting aspects of his past, because “if the memoirist is a self-conscious cultivator of his or her own myth, then it is even more difficult to separate fact from fiction” (Murdock 11). Since memoir readers almost always approach such works with a suspension of incredulity, ready to accept what’s written as true, and rarely (if ever) bothering to try to separate fact from fiction, a memoirist who misrepresents himself or his past does his reader (and perhaps himself) a tremendous disservice. There is perhaps no better example in recent literary history than James Frey.

James Frey’s “memoir”, *A Million Little Pieces*, describes his time in a drug rehabilitation centre. Despite its classification (I found this book in the non-fiction section of Palmerston North’s library) and Frey’s insistence that much of its contents are true, the revelation that Frey fictionalised key portions of the narrative in service of his idea of “story truth” throws into doubt the veracity of the entire narrative. Morley notes that “The paucity of real detail, or the forgery of detail, can undercut a memoir” (184), and Larson writes:

even the smallest percentage of a falsified factual truth (Frey's claim that he was in jail eighty-seven days instead of three hours) ruined whatever emotional truth he may have conveyed as well as called into question every factual truth in the book. If his lies are that bold in one part of the story, what's to keep him from lying in other parts? (196)

From a purely functional perspective, what Frey has done is in a sense no different from what O’Brien did in *The Things They Carried*. Rather than writing a straightforward “happening truth” account of his stay in rehab, Frey embellished certain events, changed

names, and even created an artificial “echo” of himself, someone I eventually came to think of as “Badass James Frey”—a fictional James Frey who reacted to events much differently than James Frey, author, would have. “Badass James Frey”, while written as a deeply wounded character trying to crawl out from beneath his drug addiction, also comes off as an almost heroic figure with preternatural powers of charisma, persuasion, and willpower. Frey’s adversaries fear to confront him, powerful mafiosos and federal judges naturally gravitate toward and befriend him despite his efforts to push them away, and beautiful women find him irresistible without any special exertion on his part. Frey triumphs over his most powerful adversary, his addiction, through sheer force of will alone, much as he purportedly endures a root canal procedure without benefit of anaesthetic. But the “Badass James Frey” of *A Million Little Pieces* is not just a drug addict, he is also someone with a disturbing criminal past. It’s this past which threatens to undermine the character’s future until an *amicus ex machina* secures his freedom—rather than a “god” in the machine, Frey’s newfound rehab friends save him from his fated prison stint, without Frey even having to ask for them to intervene on his behalf.

Website *The Smoking Gun* performed investigations into Frey’s supposed criminal past, including interviews with local sheriffs who had ostensibly been involved with Frey. When these officials remembered Frey at all, their recollections (and their written records) did not match up with Frey’s account in any meaningful way. After examining all available records, *The Smoking Gun*’s investigation proved beyond reasonable doubt that Frey’s criminal past as depicted in his memoir was entirely fictional. When confronted, Frey admitted he invented these encounters.

After this discovery, Oprah Winfrey (who had endorsed Frey’s memoir for her book club) pilloried Frey on national television and tried to discern his motivations for fictionalising *A Million Little Pieces*. One way of looking at Frey’s invention of “Badass James Frey” is as an example of a subgenre of semi-autobiographical fiction, the “Mary Sue” story. A term coined in 1973 by sci-fi writer Paula Smith in derisive reference to a certain flavour of *Star Trek* fanfiction, Pat Pflieger describes a “Mary Sue” character as “a character representing the author of the story, an avatar, the writer’s projection into an interesting world full of interesting people whom she watches weekly and thinks about daily,” whose actions and traits are written in blatant service to the author’s wish fulfilment. According to Trek fanfiction scholar Joan Marie Verba, a

stereotypical example of a “Mary Sue” story would be a young, female author’s *Star Trek* fanfiction where a beautiful, brilliant, young female joins the crew of the *Enterprise* and upstages the crew with her wisdom and insight (15). “Mary Sue” joins the crew, easily solves the problems the crew faces, then goes on to seduce whichever member of the crew the author finds most attractive (Captain Kirk and Spock usually being the most popular choices). “Mary Sue” stories became such common manuscripts submitted to sci-fi publishing houses that they quickly reached cliché status and are now rejected outright.

Murdock writes that “perhaps a few writers use memoir as little more than an exercise in narcissism, but they are the exception” (28). But Frey’s narrative is wildly narcissistic in the same vein as the Mary Sue story. “In these stories, Mary Sue is the center of the known universe [...] put simply, Mary Sue is more: more charming, more belligerent, more understanding, more beautiful, more graceful, more eccentric, more spiritual, more klutzy” (Pflieger). Nearly all of these traits apply in equal measure to “Badass James Frey”. His inherent charm draws people to him, his belligerence is off-putting to his adversaries, his empathy and understanding help multiple characters heal alongside him (once deprived of his presence, many of them subsequently self-destruct), women notice how handsome he is once his facial wounds heal, and Frey attains spiritual enlightenment via passages from the *Tao Te Ching*. If not for the suspension of incredulity that goes along with picking up a book labelled “memoir”, readers might well reject *A Million Little Pieces* as unbelievable; Larson notes that Frey’s “sole reliance on narrative to present a heroic self (the mental disorder is called delusions of grandeur or grandiosity) should have tipped us off that his story was way over the top” (197).

Pflieger notes that Mary Sue is “a writer's baby-steps in writing.” As his first book, *A Million Little Pieces* also arguably represents Frey’s first “baby-steps” in writing, and Verba writes that a story with a Mary Sue character

is a coming-of-age story for a woman leaving adolescence, and the death which occurs so often at the end symbolizes the death of childhood and the onset of maturity. This theory would explain why nearly every female fan writer (including me) has written a Mary Sue story at one time or another.

(15)

While James Frey is male, and “Badass James Frey” survives the events of *A Million Little Pieces*, the book is still a coming-of-age story dealing with Frey’s battle with addiction. Larson notes that authors write this type of memoir because “its ending signals the onset of the adult writer’s career—my early life has prepared me to write my tale” (46-7). Stephen King wrote *On Writing* for the same purpose, but with a different result; there’s no trace of “Mary Sue” in King’s often self-deprecating characterisation of himself, which makes both King as *character* and the memoir itself more realistic, and therefore *truer* than Frey’s book. Conveniently, Frey himself has provided the link between his “memoir” and the Mary Sue subgenre. Once it was clear his memoir was not completely factual, Frey added a two-page author’s note to the beginning of the narrative acknowledging the controversy, stating that he wrote about “the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience.”

The real problem of *A Million Little Pieces* is not that Frey fictionalised portions of his life or characterised himself as a drug-addicted demigod. After all, Tim O’Brien invented an “echo” Tim O’Brien for *The Things They Carried* without being subjected to the critical backlash Frey has faced. Frey’s technique diverges from O’Brien’s in one very important way: O’Brien *tells* his readers that what follows is fiction. Frey does not, or at least he didn’t do so until his supposed “happening truth” was revealed for the “story truth” that it was. Larson describes Frey’s attempt to rationalise his choice:

Frey believed the culture and other memoir writers were telling him that the facts in memoir have wiggle room: 5 percent fictionalization (exaggeration or lying), he said, is okay for memoirists because the form “allows” it.

(195)

The effect on reader response, once the controversy became known, was devastating. When readers, including Oprah, sat down to read a supposedly “true story”, a lengthy confessional about a drug addict’s recovery, only to find out later that large sections of the narrative were fictional and the “Badass James Frey” of *A Million Little Pieces* had little in common with the story’s author, many of these readers felt betrayed. Larson writes:

If James Frey taught us anything, it is that not only can emotional truth deceive the reader, who may not care whether a given incident is made up

[...], but the impact of one's emotional truth is lost if the author is shown to have altered core details. (196)

The reader's sense of betrayal comes from two vectors. First, it is an ethical violation. Because readers "tend to assume that if it's traumatic, it must be true" (Silbergleid 152), *A Million Little Pieces* appeals to readers in the same way that *The Things They Carried* does: even when presented with the fact of the memoir's fictional status, some readers will tend to accept Frey's account as *mostly* true anyway. An ethical issue particular to *A Million Little Pieces* is that many recovering addicts have subsequently used the narrative as a sort of "field manual" for overcoming addiction; however, with so much of Frey's memoir revealed to be fictional, these readers have been duped in a potentially deadly manner. Frey's excuse that the memoir format "allows" for a small amount of fictionalisation becomes even more wildly inappropriate when addicts are using his memoir as a guidebook, and Larson further decries Frey's methods:

Saying it's "like" fiction, or saying it's okay to fictionalize events or make character composites as long as you center on the underlying truth or message, is both a cop-out and irresponsible. The truth—not the fiction and not the imagination—matters if you're going to write memoir. (112)

Even after all the controversy, there is still nothing on the cover of *A Million Little Pieces* to distinguish Frey's novel from a more traditional memoir, which usually at least makes an honest *attempt* at relaying the "happening truth" of events. Aside from the very brief "note to the reader" prefacing the story, nothing else exists to warn readers that what they are about to read is not an entirely truthful account. Thus, the second vector of reader betrayal comes from cognitive dissonance suffered as the reader tries to reconcile his suspension of incredulity upon reading what he *thought* was a non-fictional account with new information revealing that the reader's perception of the memoir has been directly and deliberately manipulated.

Given the example of James Frey (and other fictionalising memoirists—Frey is only the most infamous), it became clear to me that writing a fabricated "memoir" was out of the question. In truth, as a writer it was clear to me before even reading Frey's book that there are lines an author simply should not cross. When done for artistic purposes, violating generic conventions can potentially have a pleasing result for both author and reader, but violating a reader's *trust* is something no author should do.

In crafting my own narrative, then, a problem arose: for various reasons, I was incapable of revealing the whole truth of the story I wanted to tell. The alternatives facing me at the early stages of writing were either to omit key information from the narrative (thus depriving it of most of its dramatic tension), fictionalise the portions which presented difficulties of representation (thus going down the same road as Frey), or scrap the project altogether and not write the story at all.

An alternative approach, drawn from O'Brien's example and reinforced by Philip Roth's approach to memoir, was to make this very inability to tell the truth the central focus. Rather than the straightforward "immigrant experience" narrative that I originally planned on writing, the story became instead a narrative detailing the conflict between truth and fiction, author and authored. I would be able to not only draw readers' focus to the artifice of my narrative without betraying their trust, I would also be able to make a broader point than I had initially planned; rather than commenting on the universality of the immigrant narrative, I instead explored the universality of *all* narrative, specifically the difficulty an author faces in trying to render "reality" into a constrained literary format.

Via metafiction, a technique that is becoming increasingly common in post-modern writing, I hoped to reconcile my desire to tell a compelling story with the necessity of presenting "story truth" in place of "happening truth" in a similar fashion to O'Brien's work.

Characteristics of Metafiction

One of the key features of metafiction is the obviousness of the technique. Italo Calvino addresses readers directly, telling them they are about to read *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Philip Roth addresses his memoir to Nathan Zuckerman for critical feedback, and Zuckerman is a character that anyone familiar with Roth's oeuvre will know is fictional. Stephen King inserts a character named "Stephen King" into the obviously fictional world of *The Dark Tower*, and that character interacts directly with the novel's protagonists *as their creator*. In each case, "the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 7). Hutcheon also writes that readers have always been responsible for creating a story's universe within their imaginations, but metafiction "makes this fact conscious and functional by revealing the conventions that 'traditional realism' sought to conceal, or even deny" (41), and this constitutes an "unmasking of what might be called the referential 'illusion' of novelistic realism" (102).

Upon settling in to read a novel, a reader has a reasonable expectation that what he is about to read is fictional, but as he reads he suspends his disbelief. The author's words work on the reader's imagination, and the reader creates the novel's world inside his head for as long as he continues reading. Metafiction calls attention to this process via "disruption and discontinuity, by disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual act of reading" and "integrating the reader in the text." This disruption forces the reader to re-evaluate his attitude toward art and "question the very possibility of understanding" not only narrative, but even reality itself (*Narcissistic Narrative* 139). If we view conventional narrative as akin to the disembodied head of *The Wizard of Oz* shouting its pronouncements while an unseen operator pulls levers behind a curtain and speaks into a microphone, providing the illusion of a great and all-powerful Oz, metafiction is the functional equivalent of that disembodied head imploring those before it to turn around and "Pay attention to the man behind the curtain!"

The metafictionist author calls attention to the artificiality of fiction in order to make a reader consciously aware of "his own role in creating the universe of fiction" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 139), and that role is to create the reality of a text "by his response and reconstituted by his active participation" (141). Patricia Waugh describes several techniques that make this reader awareness possible:

1. A narrative beginning with “an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings” (29)
2. “Obvious framing devices”
3. “Stories within stories” (“Chinese-box” structures or “fictions of infinity”)
4. “Characters reading about their own fictional lives”
5. “Self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations” (30)
6. “Authors who appear in their own fictions” (142)
7. A narrative closing “with a choice of endings” or “with a sign of the impossibility of endings” (29).

Waugh notes that metafiction is “an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions” (18) and “a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels” (5). She says the term “metafiction” is relatively new, but “the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself” (5). Waugh defines metafiction as:

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Hutcheon calls metafiction “fiction about fiction — that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 1), and Waugh says that “the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (6).

With this working definition of metafiction, a few of Waugh’s points bear closer examination. Her claim that the practice of metafiction is older than the novel is quite true; early examples of metafictional practices include the purely narrative orations that open some of Shakespeare’s plays.¹⁸ Even farther back in literary history, Greek plays had a chorus consisting of one or more actors whose sole purpose was to provide the

¹⁸ *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV Part 2*, *Henry V*, and *Troilus and Cressida* are some examples.

audience with a commentary on the goings-on of the play; these commentaries were outside the knowledge of the play's characters and a method of *direct* rather than indirect communication with the audience.¹⁹ In each case, there is an extra-narrative force at work reminding the audience that what they are viewing is a fiction.

Metafiction also plays a role in film; an actor who “breaks the fourth wall” (i.e., looks directly into the camera and/or directly addresses the viewer) can communicate information very effectively, but doing so is also a reminder to the viewer that they are *watching a film*. The technique draws viewers out of the fiction and calls attention to the film's artifice, so it is almost always something film directors use for a specific stylistic purpose. A classic comedic example would be an actor shifting his eyeline and deadpanning into the camera for a brief beat following an absurd joke; this connects the actor/character with the viewer for a brief moment and is a visual analog to the classic rimshot that accompanies classic stand-up comedy. Mel Brooks uses this comedic technique extensively in his films as a means of hammering the joke home. Metafiction is therefore not exclusive to literature, but present in the “wide range of fictions” Waugh spoke of.

Waugh's claim that “metafiction is inherent in *all* novels” is most interesting. She seems to be implying that the novel structure itself is an artifice, one which calls the reader's attention to the novel's status as fiction. Indeed, the novel contains many artifices: its dramatic structure, omniscient narrator in much third-person fiction, the uniquely contemplative “I” of first-person fiction (and memoir), the ordering of life events into episodes/chapters, arranging language into discrete paragraphs, setting off dialog with quotation marks, and using descriptive phrasing to *evoke* sensation in the reader since the medium cannot communicate the sensation itself. At the most fundamental level the act of writing itself is an artifice, a translation of spoken language into a permanent format. In the case of fiction, “*all* writers must impose their fictive worlds on the reader's imagination by sheer presence through language” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 32); in other words, Mid-World and the Gunslinger exist only

¹⁹ For example, the Chorus in *Medea* by Euripedes which, via strophe and anistrophe, provides narrative detail in the play in a manner similar to the omniscient narrator in certain forms of literature written in third-person voice.

because Stephen King's writing in the *Dark Tower* cycle paints them on the canvas of our minds.

Where metafiction goes beyond fiction is its *deliberate* focus on this process. The author's "imposition" of a "fictive world" on the reader "is an insight displayed openly in metafiction" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 32), and according to Waugh, "nearly all contemporary experimental writing displays *some* explicitly metafictional strategies" (22). Hutcheon describes three such techniques. First, "In the simplest form, the work can parade its parodic play on a certain style of writing" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 99). One method would be to write a memoir from the point of view of the family dog; all readers know dogs are incapable of writing, so the memoir's very existence makes obvious its status as fiction.

"[I]n the second manner," Hutcheon writes, "the novel can be aware of its existence as a written or printed text in words" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 100). Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is a textbook example of this type of metafiction. The novel's opening line, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*" (3) explicitly draws attention to the work's fictional status and its existence as a book. The novel has alternating chapters which address the reader directly in a second-person narration, following "you" as "you" attempt to gather together the proper chapters of the seemingly unfinished book. The chapters between these second-person narrations are all the first chapters of different novels, subtly interconnected. The entire novel exists as an exercise in trying to find *the* text of the novel, and thus the novel's artifice is laid bare for the reader's examination.

Hutcheon says that "the third and perhaps most obvious type of overt language concern is to be found in the various forms of thematized (not actualized) word play, usually puns or anagrams, which call the reader's attention to the fact that this text is made up of words" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 101). One relatively obvious example is Richard Wilson's "Harry Protagonist, Brain-Drainer", a story with a protagonist who is, indeed, named Harry Protagonist. The only other named characters in the short story are four Mars-bound American astronauts given names which are mashups of famed Americans (George Lincoln, John F. Adams, Dwight D. Roosevelt, Thomas Alva Wright), presumably to emphasise their heroism to the reader. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* contains characters with similar wordplay: "Mucho" Maas (close to

mucho mas, Spanish for “much more”); Dr Hilarius (“hilarious”); Stanley Koteks (Kotex, an American feminine hygiene brand); Mike Fallopian (Fallopian tubes, part of the human female reproductive system); and Genghis Cohen (Genghis Khan).

As part of the wordplay Hutcheon describes, Waugh notes that “novelists may introduce friends or fellow writers into their work” (132); Philip Roth takes this even farther by having a fictional writer, Nathan Zuckerman, appear in *The Facts* in order to comment on and criticise his creator (Roth)’s memoir. Another common feature of metafiction is the author’s *self-insertion* into the narrative. Paul Auster appears as a character in his *New York Trilogy*, with one of his protagonists having been mistakenly identified by another character as Auster himself. Tim O’Brien appears in *The Things They Carried* as “Tim O’Brien”, a fictionalised version of himself. Stephen King, author of the *Dark Tower* cycle, appears in the final two books as one of the key figures responsible for the existence of the entire universe. Once aware of the dichotomy between James Frey, author, and “Badass James Frey”, protagonist of *A Million Little Pieces*, it is even possible to read Frey’s “memoir” as metafiction; though the narrative may not intentionally have been written in that mode, Frey’s opening confession that he falsified aspects of the text may work on the reader’s perceptions in the same manner as metafiction, causing the reader to question where to draw the line between fiction and truth.

Hutcheon states that these techniques “appropriate the reader’s consciousness in a more deliberate and paradoxical manner, for here he must live within an *acknowledgedly* fictional universe as he reads” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 140). Like the Greek chorus in a play or “breaking the fourth wall” in film, metafiction draws the reader’s imagination *out* of the text, blocking access to the suspension of disbelief which normally occurs in fiction. Instead of losing himself in the imaginative world of fiction, the reader must negotiate the boundary between fiction and reality.

Metafiction in Memoir

Memoir and metafiction share many features in common. All of the quotes below come from critics writing about memoir, but they apply equally well as defining characteristics of metafiction:

1. “A narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name, there and then.” (Bruner 44-5)
2. “The idea of the self as other [...] a way of dealing with the otherness of the figure in the past.” (Folkenflik 234)
3. “Voicing how the self and the culture internalize each other.” (Larson 182)
4. Use of “an intimate-sounding voice, so culturally recognizable already, to cast doubt on the easy believability of that voice.” (Larson 188)

In memoir, authors employ these techniques *silently*, ideally without the reader noticing. In metafiction, authors call attention to these techniques deliberately, showing readers the narrative’s scaffolding *and* its façade. Doing so allows an author writing a memoir in a metafictional mode to subvert the normal conventions of memoir for a variety of purposes; I’ve focused on how metafiction can draw attention to and attempt to address the problem of representing truth in memoir. If a memoirist is faced with the question, “How do I tell the truth, but not the *whole* truth,” metafiction can be an attractive answer. The technique deliberately entangles the relationship between what readers can verify as true and what they simply accept as true during suspension of disbelief. Metafiction also provides memoirists with a possible means of steering a narrative between truth and untruth in a manner that avoids betraying the reader’s trust.

A Million Little Pieces would be missing a great deal of its dramatic impact if, like the real-life James Frey, its main character was in no danger of being incarcerated, and the “redemption” angle of the memoir would have suffered as well. Similarly, *The Things They Carried* would likely have lost much of its narrative “flavour” if written as a standard memoir, as O’Brien blatantly demonstrates to us when he contrasts the “story truth” of his narrative with the “happening truth” of his life. Similarly, Roth shows us in *The Facts* what happens when a fiction writer attempts to strip all the fiction out of his own life’s narrative: “This is what you get in practically *any* artist without his imagination,” fictional Zuckerman criticises his author, and follows by saying that

“Whether the task was worth the effort is something you had better consider thoroughly before submitting the book for publication” (184-5). Zuckerman further asks Roth to ask himself

[I]f I could admit into autobiography that part of me [...] that I can admit into a Zuckerman novel; if I could admit into autobiography the inadmissible; if the truly shaming facts can ever be fully borne, let alone perceived, without the panacea of imagination. (185)

The answer to all of these questions seems to be a very obvious “no” for Roth. The answer is “no” for King as well; although he inserted himself into his *Dark Tower* cycle, he admits to fictionalising certain aspects of his life in order to appease his wife (*The Dark Tower* 696). As I crafted *Infinite Regress*, the answer was “no” for me, too; with much difficulty, I learned that “Anyone who wants to tell the truth soon learns that the truth may not want to be told” (Larson 33).

Metafiction offers a potential solution to this dilemma of representation by making the dilemma itself the narrative’s central focus. An author writing in a metafictional mode “sets out to ‘represent’ the world, [but] he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be ‘represented’ ” (Waugh 3). As a result, the writer produces a work that “consistently displays its conventionality” and “explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice, and which thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction” (Waugh 4). Hutcheon notes that “Much contemporary metafiction is indeed almost solely concerned with its own artifice, its own aesthetic workings” (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 52), and Waugh says drawing attention to this artifice “carries the more or less explicit message: ‘this is make-believe’ or ‘this is play’ ” (35). Rather than taking for granted the common sense knowledge that a boundary exists between fiction and reality, metafiction probes that boundary in ways which call both concepts into question. The real can be rendered surreal; fiction can be made into truth. “Normal” aspects of life still matter—realism supplies “the ‘control’ in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves” (Waugh 18), but rather than describing normality for its own sake, metafiction shows how “its formulation through social and cultural codes brings it closer to the philosophical and mythic than was once assumed” (Waugh 16).

If Tim O'Brien had never bothered to announce to readers of *The Things They Carried* that the narrative's events were not entirely factual, it's likely most readers would accept the events described in his short story collection as true. In fact, despite O'Brien's explicit use of metafiction in the narrative, many readers regard the stories as true anyway, but O'Brien has not faced the same criticism that Frey has. Robin Silbergleid writes that "the problem of truth is the reader's [...]. The truth is an asymptote that [O'Brien] continuously approaches but will never reach. The truth emerges in the very act of telling." (150). Silbergleid also notes "the strategic use of autobiography similarly works to establish O'Brien's credibility as narrator, again insuring that the reader accepts this 'work of fiction' as 'truth' " (137). The central character of *The Things They Carried* acts as a metafictional "echo" of Tim O'Brien, author of the story; the character's name, occupation as a writer, and much of his background match up exactly with O'Brien's own in real life. Silbergleid calls this technique "autobiographical metafiction" (130), and describes it as an "emergent postmodern genre situated at the boundary between autobiography and metafiction" (131). But why does O'Brien even bother with these storytelling gymnastics? Why not just tell the "happening truth" of his experiences in Vietnam without the "patina of truthfulness and believability" Silbergleid sees in O'Brien's metafiction (139)? O'Brien tells us why when he describes the difference between "happening truth" and "story truth" in *The Things They Carried*:

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

"Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say, honestly, "Of course not."

Or I can say, honestly, "Yes."

In this passage, O'Brien admits that much of *The Things They Carried* is fictional and simultaneously explains his reasons for fictionalising. The overall effect of this metafictional technique has the same ultimate goal as Frey's goal in *A Million Little Pieces*—dramatising true events for greater narrative impact—but O'Brien avoids the criticism Frey has faced by openly admitting he is dramatising and presenting his reasons for doing so.

Writing specifically about metafiction, Svend Erik Larsen describes how the creation of a credible narrative is largely dependent on a credulous audience:

The subject that portrays or presents itself acquires its identity and reality as a subject only through the narration and does not refer to the identity of the subject outside the text. The validity of such texts depends more on the addressee accepting the narrative shaping of the subject and thereby the logic of the narration, than on the content of the actual memories feeding the story. (23)

In other words, authors don't have to tell *the truth* in order to represent "the truth" to readers. They merely have to write convincingly enough for readers to accept what they read as true. Silbergeld notes that readers will accept even a metafictional account as true so long as the narrator is credible and persuasive (132). O'Brien uses metafiction in *The Things They Carried* to illustrate the futility of trying to tell a "true" war story to readers who haven't experienced war's horrors for themselves; as Silbergeld says, "the book establishes the truth only to call it into question" (148).

Because we approach autobiographical texts with a suspension of incredulity, it's possible to capitalise upon autobiographical conventions and create a text like O'Brien's which straddles the line between non-fiction and fiction, "happening truth" and "story truth". Silbergeld notes

Strategic use of autobiography [...] works to establish O'Brien's credibility as narrator, again insuring that the reader accepts this "work of fiction" as "truth." [...] It uses appeals to autobiography as a rhetorical strategy, a ploy

by which to establish credibility, most notably through the use of “Tim O’Brien” as the narrator and protagonist. (137)

Describing O’Brien’s use of metafiction, Silbergeld writes that “this technique provides a means of engaging the ethical problems involved in writing about traumatic material, material for which the issue of the ‘true’ or the ‘real’ necessarily remains in question.” Thus, while *The Things They Carried* actually tells readers the text is fictional, because “Tim O’Brien” narrates it, readers experience the same suspension of incredulity that they would for a straightforward memoir like King’s *On Writing*. However, O’Brien also repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the issue of truth in narrative, as he does in the following passage from a chapter entitled “How to Tell a True War Story” :

In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.

Hutcheon writes that “many metafictionists have assured their readers, fictional creations are as real, as valid, as ‘truthful,’ as the empirical objects of our physical world” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 42). Waugh similarly notes that “for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality' ” (24), and metafiction must “engage with this question of the 'truth' status of literary fiction, and of necessity therefore with the question of the 'truth' status of what is taken to be 'reality' ” (90). This is identical to what takes place in a memoir, where memoirists like Zinsser note that “to write a memoir you must *manufacture* a text. You must *construct* a narrative so compelling that readers will want to keep reading” (163, emphasis added); Morley’s statement about memoir writers trying to “close that distance between reader and writer while also dealing in the factual” also applies to metafiction (178).

In “How to Write a True War Story”, O’Brien outlines for his readers the problem of representing truth in a war story:

You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, "Is it true?" and if the answer matters, you've got your answer.

For example, we've all heard this one. Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen—and maybe it did, anything's possible—even then you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth.

Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. For example: Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it's a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says, "The fuck you do *that* for?" and the jumper says, "Story of my life, man," and the other guy starts to smile but he's dead. That's a true story that never happened.

Before even opening the book, a reader will know *The Things They Carried* is fictional, because it's labelled as such on the outside jacket. But the narrative itself is filled with "true stories that never happened", with at least part of the stories' credibility coming from O'Brien's use of metafictional techniques. It's partially because of these metafictional techniques that readers will experience the same suspension of incredulity during *The Things They Carried* as they would for a narrative labelled and marketed as a memoir, and I argue use of metafiction in O'Brien's narrative is wholly responsible for avoiding the negative reader response James Frey faced once *A Million Little Pieces* was revealed to be fictionalised. With even a simple introductory line like, "The following is a true story that never happened," Frey could have gained readers' trust and credibility for his narrative. If he had been honest about his novel's fictionalisation from the beginning rather than trying to pass it off as 100 percent true, Frey would have avoided violating that trust and credibility.

Inspired by O'Brien's technique, I have opened *Infinite Regress* with an address to the reader that takes an additional step down the path he paved. In those first few

pages, I describe myself as a “con artist [...] fraudster [...] swindler, cheat, *bamboozler*.” I ask the reader

Will you read what follows any differently? Will you question the “truth” as it’s presented here, or will you fall for the con, too? Maybe this warning will ultimately prove counterproductive. After *telling* you everything Rawson says is a lie, you might shrug and say, “Well, at least he admits it. That’s refreshing.”

From the first pages, I have set myself up as an unreliable narrator, which by itself might have been enough to subvert the memoir genre. Through use of another metafictional technique called infinite regression, I have made it even clearer to the reader that a boundary exists between truth and fiction, but I have simultaneously complicated the distinction between them to draw even greater attention to the issue of narrative truth.

Infinite Regression: The Author as the Authored

Discussing “creative nonfiction” (i.e., memoir), Morley writes, “We are our own fictions even if most of the time we do not wish to understand ourselves in this way” (184-5). In metafiction, the idea that the author is his own fiction is often the central point of the narrative. Infinite regression demonstrates how the relationship between fiction and non-fiction can become hazy; Chuck Palahniuk writes, “It’s hard to call any of my novels ‘fiction’ ” (*Stranger than Fiction* xvii). “Parts of *Fight Club* have always been true,” he says. “It’s less a novel than an anthology of my friends’ lives” (228). In a 2002 speech at Columbia Basin College in eastern Washington State, Palahniuk admitted to the audience that almost all of his fiction is either drawn directly from his life or the lives of people he knows. “But now, more and more, what little was fiction is becoming reality,” Palahniuk notes after describing fans who approach him and ask in low, secretive tones where the nearest fight club is; “It’s that same feeling when you get between two mirrors in the barber shop and you can see your reflection of your reflection of your reflection going off into infinity...” (228-9). Critic Clive Sinclair similarly notes that “Art draws upon life and then, as if dissatisfied with that minor role, seeks to influence the subsequent lives of the artist and his subjects in completely unexpected ways, so that real people are forced to act out sequels to fictions” (171). Palahniuk and Sinclair describe fiction depending on a reality that is, itself, influenced by or even partially formed out of fiction. When an author deliberately expresses this idea in a narrative, this concept of infinite regression serves a metafictional purpose, showing readers this link between real life and imagination.

Waugh notes that infinite regression reminds readers that “there is ultimately no distinction between 'framed' and 'unframed'. There are only levels of form. There is ultimately only 'content' perhaps, but it will never be discovered in a 'natural' unframed state” (31). In other words, the technique negates the idea that a reader can find “truth” in narrative, because narrative is only a *representation* of truth. According to Waugh, metafiction “exposes the creation/description paradox,” and shows that “literary fiction can never imitate or 'represent' the world but always imitates or 'represents' the discourses which in turn construct that world” (100).

In *The Facts*, fictional Nathan Zuckerman sheds much light on the problem of representing truth in narrative via his response to Roth’s autobiography, and his

response falls into the category of infinite regression. Zuckerman's feedback is less than kind: "Don't publish—you are far better off writing about me than 'accurately' reporting your own life" (161). Zuckerman's quotes around the word "accurately" suggest he is unconvinced Roth has indeed given us "the facts" in his autobiography. Jay Rogoff agrees with Zuckerman's response to *The Facts*, writing that "despite its title and subtitle's claim to truth, it deals not only with the 'facts' behind some of Roth's work, but also with the deceptions a writer practices, even—perhaps especially—in the act of claiming to come clean" (508).

The critical thing to keep in mind when examining Zuckerman's response to Roth's autobiography is that when "Zuckerman" writes to and about Roth, *Roth is still writing about himself*. Zuckerman's criticisms of Roth are Roth's criticisms of himself, and in many cases, criticisms of the autobiographical mode in general. In this way *The Facts* becomes what Rogoff calls "a counter-memoir, almost a roman à clef posing as nonfiction" (510).

Zuckerman criticises Roth (Roth criticises himself) for fictionalising his ex-wife Margaret as the character Josie: "I think you must give Josie her real name [...] you owe it to her not because it would be a nice thing to do but because it's the narratively strong thing to do" (178-9). Zuckerman says Josie is the closest thing to a peer that Roth has in *The Facts* (179), calls her "the heroine of this book", and admonishes Roth to "Honor with her name the demon [...] the psychopath [...] the destructive force [...] It's only right that she have her real name in there, just as you have yours" (180).

Despite Zuckerman's criticism, Margaret remains "Josie" in Roth's autobiography because Roth does *not* want to grant her the honour of her real name. It's not out of chivalrous motivation—Zuckerman/Roth tells us that "in autobiography chivalry is an evasion and a lie" (182). Roth reveals his motivation for obfuscating "the facts" in *The Facts* very early in the narrative:

[T]he nonfictional approach has brought me closer to how experience actually *felt* than has turning the flame up under my life and smelting stories out of all I've known. I'm not arguing that there's a kind of existence that exists in fiction that doesn't exist in life or vice versa but simply saying that a book that faithfully conforms to the facts, a distillation of the facts that leaves off with the imaginative fury, can unlock meanings that fictionalizing

has obscured, distended, or even inverted and can drive home some sharp emotional nails. (7)

Since by Roth's own admission his wife was his "worst enemy ever" (112), his memoir provides him a second attempt at achieving the closure that *My Life as a Man*, an earlier, fictionalised account of his disastrous marriage, apparently failed to provide. On the subject of *closure*, Murdock notes that "it is the act of writing rather than the writing itself that provides an opportunity to heal" (76), and "the fundamental premise of memoir writing is a belief in the restorative power of telling one's truth; once told, the writer can begin to move on with her life" (81). Writing about an event causes it to "lose its hold on us" (112), with the writer "capable of moving beyond the old image and being healed" (114). Tarnopol's fictional triumph over Maureen in *My Life as a Man* was insufficient; even twenty years after her death, it's apparent what influence Margaret still holds over Roth through the language he uses to describe her in *The Facts*. "She produced the perfect atmosphere in which I couldn't think" (102); "I was erotically too mummified"; "I knew the moment she said [she was pregnant] that it was a lie" (103); "things were as hellish as they'd ever been" (104); "When she wouldn't stop I wanted to kill her"; "a hard-up loser"; "obviously foundering woman" (105); and so on. "Without a doubt she was my worst enemy ever," Roth tells us (112), and like Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*, the Roth of *The Facts* wonders how his wife can be dead if he didn't kill her himself (151).

Roth's refusal to give Margaret her true name, instead giving her the diminutive "Josie", is an attempt not only to diminish her as a character but also to diminish her as one of the major influences in Roth's life. Just as Tarnopol's identity in *My Life as a Man* was in large part formed out of his traumatic marriage to Maureen, so has Roth's identity been largely forged in the aftermath of his disastrous relationship with Margaret. In *The Facts*, with 20 years of hindsight, Roth can transform his "worst enemy" into "Josie", who comes off in the narrative more as a force of nature than a human being with real motivations.

Roth's reference to non-fictional self-examination driving home sharp emotional nails not only unveils his reason for not giving us a truly representational memoir, it also seemingly supports the assertion that memoir is somehow "realer" than fiction.

Yet Roth subverts that very assertion by leaving out many of “the facts” and criticising himself for doing so (via Zuckerman):

[I]t's just as impossible to be proper and modest and well behaved and be a revealing autobiographer as it is to be all that and a good novelist. Very strange that you don't grasp this. Or maybe you do but, because of a gigantic split between how you're sincere as yourself and how you're sincere as an artist, you can't enact it, and so we get this fictional autobiographical projection of a *partial* you. (172)

The Facts contains so many intentional subversions or obfuscations of the truth that, as Rogoff notes, “We end *The Facts* satisfied by the many truths confessed and wondering how many more Roth has kept from us” (510). Rogoff also writes that “Roth the novelist keeps reminding us how the fictional impulse can hold sway over nonfiction and confound our assumptions about a document's truth or ‘honesty.’” Nowhere is this more obvious than when Zuckerman/Roth writes a damning criticism not only of *The Facts* but of all autobiography: “With autobiography there's always another text, a countercontext, if you will, to the one presented. **It's probably the most manipulative of all literary forms**” (172, emphasis added).

The key to understanding *The Facts* as a metafictional memoir is that when Zuckerman acts as Roth's foil and critic, Roth is really acting out those roles. Although the final third of the novel comes to us from the voice of a fictional character, in a sense Zuckerman is still giving us “the facts” just as much as (if not more than) Roth without his fictional mask. By confronting himself and the compromises he has made in his memoir in this fashion, Roth softens the distinction between author and authored. *The Facts* becomes less about what Roth has revealed and more about what he has obscured, and why, and the metafictional technique of having Zuckerman act as Roth's “other” in *The Facts* accomplishes this in a manner that perhaps makes *The Facts* more satisfying to read (and write) than if Roth had written the entire narrative in his own voice rather than appropriating the voice of his creation. As for the infinite regression technique itself, the circularity of the argument presented (Zuckerman, Roth's creation, criticises Roth and his creations) is a brilliant example of the “hall of mirrors” effect Palahniuk described. Roth's use of the technique heavily inspired my own writing of *Infinite*

Regress, where the dispute over who is the author and who is the authored is one of the narrative's main driving forces.

Stephen King similarly renders enigmatic the relationship between author and authored in his *Dark Tower* cycle through the use of two metafictional techniques, both of which fall into the category of infinite regression. King tells the story of being struck by Bryan Smith's van in two different books, with two different narrative sensibilities at work. In *On Writing*, he gives us a straightforward, non-fictional, "happening truth" accounting of his trauma. His nearly deadly accident actually occurred as he was in the middle of writing *On Writing*, so its insertion into the memoir gives us an insight into how the traumatic experience of nearly dying changed all the work that followed. The same story told in a fictional mode in *The Dark Tower* cycle can be interpreted in a way that gives insight into King's post-accident state.

King originally wrote sections of *The Gunslinger* in the early 1970s, finally publishing the entirety of the first novel in 1982. Over the next 15 years, King only produced another three books in the *Dark Tower* cycle, with lulls of as much as six years between instalments. After King's accident in 1999, there was another four-year hiatus before another novel in the *Dark Tower* series appeared, but the final three novels appeared in very quick succession: *Wolves of the Calla* in 2003 and both *Song of Susannah* and *The Dark Tower* in 2004. In a period of four years, King contributed almost as much to the *Dark Tower* mythos as he had in nearly 30 years before his accident.

On Writing's post-accident account of King's return to writing doesn't give much insight into why he suddenly became so driven to finish the series he's claimed is the linchpin of all his fiction, but the plot of *The Dark Tower* does. In the final novel of the series, evil forces are actively trying to tear the fabric of the universe apart, and killing Stephen King is part of that effort. King's telling of the story is one of the things which brings the universe of the *Dark Tower* into existence, not just in our reality (where King is literally the story's author), but in the novels' reality, too. "I'm afraid of not being able to finish," a young version of King tells the Gunslinger in 1977. "I'm afraid the Tower will fall and I'll be held to blame" (*Song of Susannah* 311). In a fictionalised series of journal entries at the end of *Song of Susannah*, King writes

I know so many people are depending on me to finish the cycle. And I want to finish it! God, yes! No Canterbury Tales or Mystery of Edwin Drood in my portfolio, thank you very much. And yet I always feel as if some anti-creative force is looking around for me, and that I am easier to see when I'm working on these stories. (422)

This fictionalised journal begins immediately after King's encounter with the Gunslinger in 1977 and follows him through the next 22 years, chronicling several aspects of King's life and writing career. Written in the same narrative voice as King's other autobiographical works, it's easy to mistake these journal entries as non-fictional, at least until the final entry: an article from a real newspaper, written by a real reporter, describing King's *death* following his accident (405-27). Then the veracity of the entire "journal" portion in the appendix comes into question, despite King's inclusion of letters and narratives from other autobiographical sources (e.g., letters from fans begging him to tell them what happens at the end because they're close to death, said letters having been included in the appendices of earlier works). The journal is yet another metafiction within *The Dark Tower* series, and it serves to show the forces at work, both realistic and fantastic, which have tried to prevent King from finishing the series.

King's desperation to finish the cycle shows at several other points in its final two novels, when King states he "could be sitting in front of his typewriter in his office on the morning of June 19th, [...] and the next... boom! Lying in a nearby funeral parlor that evening [...] And the Dark Tower? [...] Lost forever" (*The Dark Tower* 329). The novel's characters, aware of his existence as their creator, also express disgust with King at several points in the narrative, calling him "the lazybones *writer*" (331) and a "miserable excuse for a man" (370). These are effectively self-criticisms; any time the characters are denigrating King, the author is actually denigrating himself in his own words, just as Roth's Zuckerman did in *The Facts*. "You tell him not to stop with his writin," (*sic*) one character admonishes Roland, the Gunslinger, before his fateful meeting with his creator. "You tell him to go on and be *done* with his motherfuckin *story*" (332).

Roland's attitude toward King is even more revelatory, because King outright tells readers in *Song of Susannah* that "Stephen King *looked* like Roland. Given the age

difference they could never be mistaken for twins, but father and son? Yes. Easily” (287). King employs “doubles” at several points in the *Dark Tower* cycle, with real-life people showing up as fictional characters on other planes of reality; with the cycle’s main character as *his* own double, Roland’s behaviour toward King is perhaps indicative of King’s opinion of himself. In summary, Roland despises his creator, and it’s only because King’s continued existence is essential to the maintenance of his universe that Roland doesn’t kill King himself. Roland angrily muses that if King had been “doing what ka [fate] had meant him to be doing” (sitting at home writing the next novel in the cycle), King never would have been struck by Bryan Smith’s van (368). “One of my friends is dead, another may be dying [...] all because one lazy, fearful man stopped doing the job for which ka intended him,” Roland admonishes King as the writer lies broken and bleeding on the roadside (369). When King protests that he lost the story’s thread, Roland replies, “You didn’t lose it, you turned your coward’s eye away” (370). The harsh, blunt language here is plainly directed at not just the metafictional King, but at the author himself.

“When you can write again [...] this time you’ll sing until the song is done [...] write until the tale is done,” Roland commands him (372). “I’ll do as you say, gunslinger. No matter how the tale falls when the pages grow thin,” King responds (373), and this is indeed how the remainder of *The Dark Tower* cycle played out in real life. Despite the physical hardships he suffered in his post-accident recovery, King’s brush with death clearly motivated him to finish the story much faster than he might have otherwise. It shows in the somewhat frantic pacing of the final two novels in the series; it would be interesting to see how differently things would have played out in *The Dark Tower* cycle had King *not* had his accident. King claims that since many of his fictions refer back to *The Dark Tower* in some way, “it seemed logical that I was part of the gunslinger’s ka” (685). King’s accident afforded him a reason to make Roland part of King’s own “ka” as well, and as a method of expressing his post-accident trauma in a constructive manner via his fiction.

King’s authorial self-insertion is an example of what Waugh describes as a novel which “hang[s] on to the concept of author as inventor of the text, which aim[s] to show there are only ‘degrees of telling’.” She says metafictionists accomplish this by “cross [ing] the ontological divide,” and states that “instead of integrating the ‘fictional’ with

the 'real' as in traditional omniscient narrative, he or she splits them apart by commenting not on the *content* of the story but on the act of narration itself, on the *construction* of the story.” (131)

King's function as a character within *The Dark Tower* is to craft the other characters into being by telling their stories, which is what King is literally doing by writing the books. By explicitly calling the reader's attention to King's role as the story's creator, he is effectively telling them to “Pay attention to the man behind the curtain!” Within *The Dark Tower*, King does not exist as “I”, however; his presence is filtered through the omniscient narrator of the cycle, as well as the *real* Stephen King writing the books. This is another example of metafiction at work; the “I” who occasionally narrates the story is different from the “he” of Stephen King as *character*, and the “I” narrator is different from the “I” of the real world's Stephen King (Waugh 134-5).

King also offers readers a choice of endings to *The Dark Tower*, the final book in the cycle. In fact, at several points, and at length, he directly implores readers to *stop* reading. The choice King gives his readers: set the book aside after Roland finally enters the eponymous Dark Tower (the culmination of decades of waiting for many readers) and imagine whatever fate for Roland they wish, or continue reading and witness what befalls Roland after entering the Tower. The ultimate ending, which King hopes his readers will avoid, is Roland's ascent to the top of the Tower, where he discovers to his (and perhaps the reader's) dismay that the journey to the Tower is an infinite cycle: Roland has journeyed to the Tower before, he will again, and the cycle may never be broken. This is in fact extra-textually true; readers who decide to set down *The Dark Tower* and go back to *The Gunslinger*, the first novel in the series, are effectively doing exactly what King's ending describes as they re-read: sending Roland back to the beginning of his journey, with both character and reader walking the same roads and reliving the same dramas. King's ending tells readers that there is no “ending” to the *Dark Tower* cycle, only an infinite loop.

Both the idea of “nested narrators” and the “tale within the tale” are “means of suggesting infinite circularity”, and these “images of infinite regression remind the reader of the fictive nature of the chronology assumed by realism” (Waugh 142). I employed these techniques in *Infinite Regress* in an attempt to sidestep the issue of

generating a “truthful” memoir. Rather than worrying over how to represent myself and my story truthfully, I instead used infinite regression to show the inherent difficulties of truthful self-representation. The story of two conflicting versions of myself, each questioning the reality of themselves and one another, and operating on multiple levels of “reality” (none of them, in truth, any “realer” than the others), is my version of the “hall of mirrors” Palahniuk describes.

No one *truth* exists in *Infinite Regress*; the closest the story gets to “the” truth is in the novella’s final pages, where after a factual mini-autobiography I present to the reader the very difficulty I have discussed herein: when an author becomes aware of the impossibility of communicating the *whole* truth, the only way to be completely truthful with his readers is to admit that everything he has written is, in a sense, a lie.

Paradoxically, in many cases the closer *Infinite Regress* comes to *the truth*, the more obscure the language becomes. The final section, “One Last Thing”, directly addresses the real person whose characteristics inspired many of the traits of *The Last Boat out of America*’s antagonist. In crafting references to this real person, I deliberately avoided even referring to pronouns in order to obscure gender. Preserving this person’s anonymity within *Infinite Regress* for the sake of real-world harmony was one of the biggest challenges in crafting the narrative, and it was one of the reasons my internal debate between truthful representation and fictionalised obfuscation came up at all. Without being able to resolve this difficulty to my satisfaction, I instead used metafiction to focus on the difficulty itself and make that the main focus of the narrative.

Conclusion:

Do Not Write a Metafictional Memoir Unless You *Must*

The problem with metafiction is that it solves nothing; it is not a *solution* to the problem of truthful self-representation. Using metafiction in *Infinite Regress* still did not allow me to fully express sentiments or describe events which, when withheld or fictionalised, would have made a straightforward memoir untruthful; in other words, it did not ultimately provide a complete resolution to my question, “How can I tell a true story without telling *all* of the truth?” All metafiction allows an author to do is make readers explicitly aware that the giant, disembodied head addressing them in the narrative is fake; it does not change the fact that the author is still behind the curtain, working the levers.

Telling a “true” story in a fictional manner has its own pitfalls, and they centre around how a reader will respond to the narrative. As Rogoff suggests, there are different “contracts” between writers and readers of non-fiction versus fiction (498). A large part of this contract is the difference between suspension of disbelief in fiction and what I’ve called suspension of incredulity in non-fiction. James Frey is perhaps the most famous recent example of an author being caught out in a violation of this contract thanks to his very public chastisement, but over the past few decades numerous other examples of authorial contract violations have occurred.²⁰ Many of these are on even shakier ethical ground than *A Million Little Pieces*; when I examined the list of authors

²⁰ Most of these books received high critical praise until part or all of their narratives were unmasked as fabrications. At least one novel (*Go Ask Alice*) was still part of a university-level curriculum on young adult literature at Kent State University as late as 2004, in spite of its known status as the falsified memoir of a teenage drug addict. Several of these faked memoirs (bolded) involve fictionalised accounts of Holocaust survival.

Go Ask Alice - Beatrice Sparks AKA “Anonymous” (1971)
The Autobiography of Howard Hughes - Clifford Irving (1972)
The Greatest, My Own Story - Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham (1975)
The Education of Little Tree - Asa Earl Carter AKA Forrest Carter (1976)
Satan’s Underground - Laurel Rose Willson AKA Lauren Stratford (1988)
Mutant Message Down Under - Marlo Morgan (1991)
The Hand that Signed the Paper - Helen Dale AKA Helen Demidenko (1996)
In Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood - Benjamin Wilkomirski (1996)
Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years - Misha Defonseca AKA Monique de Wael, 1997
The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams - Nasdijj (2000)
The Honored Society - Michael “Gambino” Pellegrino (2001)
Forbidden Love - Norma Khouri (2003)
Love and Consequences - Margaret Seltzer (2008)
Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love that Survived - Herman Rosenblat (2009, cancelled)
Odd Man Out: A Year on the Mound with a Minor League Misfit - Matt McCarthy (2009)

caught trying to pass off fictional accounts as true autobiographical events, falsified tales of Holocaust survival came up repeatedly. “We tend to assume that if it’s traumatic, it’s true,” according to Silbergeld (152), and few events in history, possibly none, are as traumatic as the Holocaust. Writers attempting to appropriate the trauma of that event to suit their purposes do so at great peril; even obviously fictional works using the Holocaust as scenery, like Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, have been subjected to heavy criticism for what some see as an exploitative approach. Frey and these Holocaust appropriators therefore serve as a cautionary example of what *not* to do when blurring the distinction between fiction and non-fiction: if you’re going to lie to your readers in this fashion, perhaps the only way you can get away with it is by *telling them* you’re lying to them, and more importantly *why*, as O’Brien does in *The Things They Carried*.

O’Brien’s use of the Vietnam War as a traumatic backdrop for his fiction is in one sense little different from Frey’s expropriation of a drug rehab facility and all the ripe traumas that setting contains. Both authors are depicting distressing events and settings in order to draw their readers more deeply into the narrative. Both authors actually lived through events which were at least broadly similar to those portrayed in their fictions. Both authors fictionalise these events and their responses to them in order to make their stories *larger* than life. Where they diverge is in their treatment of the distinction between “story truth” and “happening truth”—Frey (wrongly in the judgment of his readers and numerous critics) insists they are the same, while O’Brien very plainly tells his readers they are *not*. Therefore, Frey violates the “contract”, but O’Brien does not.

The success or failure of metafiction as a technique depends nearly as much on the reader’s response as it does on the author’s skill. Can an author make readers *believe* what they’re reading even if these readers know it’s manifestly untrue because the author has *told them so*? Following that, can readers accept that this wavering between “story truth” and “happening truth” serves a greater purpose than simply manipulating their perceptions for the fun of it? As for that most wary of readers, the literary critic, authors of metafiction must convince those readers that a text which necessitates reading *outside the text* in order to fully grasp its contents is something more than a merely “playful” postmodernist ploy.

In fact, metafiction has the potential to do more harm than good from the perspective of reader response. Thanks to James Frey and other fictionalising memoirists, the genre is already on shaky ground with readers wary of being duped by a manipulative author; in this literary climate, *telling* readers they're about to be lied to risks driving them away. Hutcheon notes that with metafiction, "The act of reading is no longer safe, comfortable, unproblematic; the assaulted reader's confidence in, and certainty of, his very language is undermined" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 99), and Waugh writes that "metafictional novels simultaneously strengthen each reader's sense of an everyday real world while problematizing his or her sense of reality from a conceptual or philosophical point of view" (34). This is, perhaps, a more demanding type of reading than many readers are willing to undertake. The common view holds that people read fiction for the "escapism" it offers, while people read memoirs expecting them to be "honest" (Murdock 148) and "real" (Larson 94). Hutcheon writes that "the most authentic and honest fiction might well be that which most freely acknowledges its fictionality. Distanced from the text's world in this way, the reader can share, with the author, the pleasure of its imaginative creation" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 49), but it's questionable whether the average reader, and moreover the average *memoir* reader, will find pleasure in the manner Hutcheon describes.

Even well-respected authors like Roth are not immune from misinterpretation, even by readers trained in critical theory. I assumed, based on the title alone, that *My Life as a Man* was Roth's autobiography. Upon sitting down to read it, I experienced the same emotion that Patrick O'Donnell's "fictional reader" did (145): confusion upon learning that the novel instead consists of two short stories told from the perspective of Nathan Zuckerman and the autobiography of a fictional character, Peter Tarnopol, author of the "useful fictions" featuring Zuckerman at the beginning of the novel. O'Donnell's hypothetical reader tosses the book aside in disgust — happily, I did not — and the same fate endangers a metafictional narrative like *The Facts*. A reader approaching something labelled as "A Novelist's Autobiography" must expect that the narrative contained within its pages is truthful; how will those readers react upon learning that a large portion of the text consists of a fictional character criticising the endeavour as a waste of time? Hutcheon notes that "the reader's genre expectations [...] and *not* the subject matter or any supposedly real referents" are what determine

whether a narrative is “real” or not (*Narcissistic Narrative* 97), so if a reader picks up an “autobiography” and sets it down hours or days later finding out it wasn’t an autobiography after all, that reader may have the same sort of negative reaction that many had upon learning that *A Million Little Pieces* was a “memoir” in name only.

Narrative self-insertion in metafiction is a similarly risky undertaking. The temptation to idealise oneself as in a “Mary Sue” story exists, but the temptation for self-idealisation strikes in still subtler ways when we make ourselves the “heroes” of our own stories, as Roth points out in *The Facts*:

This isn't to say that I didn't have to resist the impulse to dramatize untruthfully the insufficiently dramatic, to complicate the essentially simple, to charge with implication what implied very little—the temptation to abandon the facts when those facts were not so compelling as others I might imagine if I could somehow steel myself to overcome fiction-fatigue. (7)

Each of these impulses Roth describes point to a problem inherent to both memoir and metafiction: handled gracelessly, either can come off as cloyingly narcissistic.

O'Donnell points out that even in the hands of an expert like Roth, a novel like *My Life as a Man* (which I believe occupies a generic no-man's-land between fiction, memoir, and metafiction) can be off-putting to readers, with “All of the textual veils [...] thinly disguising the real subject of Roth's novel—Roth himself [...] begging the reader's indulgence for this three-hundred-page-plus display of self-indulgence” (146). Roth, via Zuckerman's wife's reaction to his autobiography, even anticipates this reader response in *The Facts*: “Surely there must come a point where even *he* is bored with his own life's story” (188).

The author's presence in his own story may also distract readers from the main point of the narrative if readers react to it by perceiving authorial self-indulgence or narcissism. This was my response to King's presence as a character in his final two *Dark Tower* books on my first reading; I found King's use of metafiction both gimmicky and flagrantly self-aggrandising, and it seemed to me that King was positioning himself as the “God” of this universe. While true in a sense (he did, after all, shape the plot, setting, and characters of the *Dark Tower* cycle), the fact that the survival of *the entire universe* hinged on King surviving his roadside accident seemed the height of narcissism. Only on a subsequent reading was I able to look past that

initial impression and see *why* King had written himself into the books, at least beyond the explanation he gave:

My idea was to use the *Dark Tower* series as a kind of summation, a way of unifying as many of my previous stories as possible beneath the arch of some *über*-tale. I never meant that to be pretentious (and I hope it isn't), but only as a way of showing how life influences art (and vice-versa).

(*The Dark Tower* 685)

King took a great risk by essentially making himself one of the “gods” of the *Dark Tower*’s mythos. Although in reality the existence of this fictional universe *is* totally dependent on his creative input, when it’s represented that way within the narrative itself, it becomes far easier to lay charges of narcissism at the author’s feet.

Although Stephen King employed metafiction in the final two novels of his *Dark Tower* cycle, King himself detests the term “metafiction”, saying he hates “the pretentiousness of it” and calling it a “smarmy academic term” (*The Dark Tower* 685). Even among academics metafiction has an uncertain reputation; Svend Erik Larsen satirises the critical view of metafiction by asking

Does it not just refer to some author’s self-centered ruminations in the ivory tower? Or a topic for the nerds of literary studies with a taste for theoretical acrobatics? If so, in both cases following metafictional inclinations results in complete isolation from both the context of literature and its readers. (13)

Hutcheon writes that metafiction garnered widely negative reviews in the 1970s, and “cries of lamentation over the death of the novel genre abounded” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 2). These negative reviews came about “on the basis of [metafiction] being the death of the novel, solipsistic, and self destructive, not to say ‘unrealistic’ ” (37).

Much like satire, metafictional explorations may do more harm than good to the narrative for some readers; both techniques are easy for readers to misinterpret unless the author handles them with skill and care. O’Donnell addressed this via his theoretical reader’s response to Roth’s *My Life as a Man*, a response I initially shared until the narrative’s purpose became clear to me. Similarly, Roth’s *The Counterlife* can confuse a reader unprepared for its narrative Immelmann turns. That novel, much like *My Life as a Man* and *The Facts*, is an example of Roth using metafictional techniques

(in this case, periodic plot and perspective shifts) to point out the futility of seeking narrative “truth” in fiction. Rogoff writes

[*The Counterlife*] endorses none of its scenarios as the dominant one. Each strikes us as equally viable, with as good a claim as any of the others to “truth.” To our question, Which of these stories has really happened? the book answers: all of them—and none. It's fiction, after all. (503)

This is a worthy point to make in literature, but it falls perilously close to the “self-centered ruminations in the ivory tower” and “theoretical acrobatics” that Larsen noted as common criticisms of metafiction. Readers who miss the high-concept ideas behind works like *The Counterlife*, *My Life as a Man*, or *The Facts* may, as O'Donnell suggests, simply set the book aside, frustrated with its inscrutability.

Anticipating this reader response with some trepidation in my own work, in *Infinite Regress* I have done my best to justify to the reader the context of what they've just read. I've also made it plain from the beginning of the narrative that it is *not* a memoir, so readers expecting to read one will know, as soon as possible, that I have no interest in betraying the “contract”. Even so, after concluding *Infinite Regress* I do not feel as though I have satisfactorily addressed the issue of telling a “truthful” memoir merely by pointing out that the idea of “truth” in memoir is problematic. Using metafiction to hone in on the difficulty of truthful representation in memoir feels rather like telling the reader, “I cannot tell you the whole truth. Because of that, I am instead going to show you how ‘truth’ is just another way of saying ‘fiction deprived of all imagination’.”

I wrote the bulk of *Infinite Regress* before reading one word of theoretical musings on metafiction, and I found it both fascinating and dismaying how closely the narrative hewed to what theorists like Hutcheon and Waugh describe. Fascinating, because I discovered that with little theoretical knowledge of metafiction at my disposal, I had managed to produce something that seems to be a textbook example of metafiction anyway. Dismaying, because I found that techniques I'd considered groundbreaking or original only a few months earlier amounted to little more than re-inventing the wheel.

Now that I have gained a greater appreciation for both memoir and metafiction (two areas of literature that, before undertaking this project, I considered disreputable),

it is likely that I will employ both techniques more often in my writing. One day, it may be possible for me to write the truthful memoir that *Infinite Regress* studiously avoids being. As for metafiction, I have always taken a certain pleasure in manipulating readers' conceptions of reality, and metafiction is well-suited to that purpose. Whether I mix memoir and metafiction together again will depend greatly upon the response to *Infinite Regress*; memoir and metafiction are risky propositions on their own, and mixing them together seems, upon reflection, to have had a multiplicative rather than additive effect upon the risk. It is not an undertaking I would recommend to many authors.

Larson notes that "metanarrating may be the only way a memoir can get written if the memoir's self-awakened subject is *how do I write one*" (95), and it is one possible answer to his description of the memoirist's dilemma, "anyone who wants to tell the truth soon learns that the truth may not want to be told" (33). However, metafiction does not *solve* the problem of "truth" in memoir; instead, it sidesteps it in a fashion that may only add to reader anxiety. If evoking anxiety in the reader over the nature of "truth" is the author's goal, then metafiction is tailor-made for the purpose; if telling a "truthful" memoir is the goal, metanarrating may be preferable only to not telling the story at all.

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