

## Chapter 1 – Warning Signs

*A*s was traditional at the time in Ireland, my parents were quite young when they married, fresh out of their teens. I was born a year later, 1984 in Waterford Regional Hospital. Within three years, I had two younger brothers, and together in those early years we shared many happy moments as a family. I was a creative kid, always drawing pictures or with my head in a book, shy and introspective for the most part. My two brothers were a bit more outgoing and sportier than me and they usually stuck together as a result.

After moving to a new house a few times, my Dad had secured steady work at the local Waterford Crystal factory, and my parents were able to get a mortgage on a house. My mother also worked several jobs from hairdressing to child-minding to working at the local cinema, all while raising three boys. It was in this house where most of my earliest memories are clearest, my first sip of beer with my Dad, staying up late to watch movies like *Die Hard* and *Predator*, or that time I invited forty kids to my birthday party when I was only supposed to have ten. Our first dog, our first video games, back when video games were still new, TVs more often than not had wooden frames, all our clothes were second hand, and we were grateful to have them. There are too many happy memories from that time to pick apart, and for that I am thankful.

My parents did their very best for us, always, but were not immune to problems of their own. It's important for me to take a moment to acknowledge, as an adult, that I don't blame my parents for how I ended up. I can look back now and understand the circumstances they were struggling under. Money was always an issue, as it is for everybody I guess, but I developed a personal hatred for its supposed importance early on and it has always remained with me. The Crystal factory shut down and laid off a load of workers, my Dad included, and as the arguments grew more severe between them, they decided to separate around 1996.

Why they broke up is between them, this story is not about their separation, but after that I began to show warning signs of problems to come, between the ages of eleven and fourteen. Because my Dad moved out, the mortgage was no longer being paid, and so we had to leave the house where so many memories reside to this day.

Oh, somebody else lives there now I'm sure, but I often wonder if the countless action figures and toys buried in the garden were ever discovered.

My Mam is the most resilient person I know, and she managed to find an affordable, smaller rented house next door to her sister and our cousins. My two brothers flourished in this new environment, a small housing estate with plenty of other kids their age out kicking a football or playing hurling. I was becoming more withdrawn unfortunately, engaged in the important task of growing up too quickly, thinking too much, staying up late at night worrying about my mother's crying. My emotions were running riot of course, puberty was all over me, pimples, piercings, confused sexuality, the lot. Bad timing really, coupled with the endless bullying I faced on a daily basis at school. All I remember from that time is fighting and being afraid of being ganged up on and beaten up. The town was small, and what wisdom was passed on to kids was narrow-minded. Anything different or offbeat was frowned upon.

I became very independent in my own way during this time, though I was a bit of a loner and a bookworm, my friends were all geeks and misfits of a similar cast. We would cycle outside of town, building secret camps, or stay in to play the latest video games. There was a retained innocence to everything, a naive belief in people, that everything would work out fine. As time went by however, the outside influences became more negative than positive, I retreated more and more into myself, communicating rarely. It seemed like it came out of nowhere when my parents got back together, but we were all genuinely happy to have our Dad back in our lives. Up until this point, I haven't been able to add much detail to my descriptions. Memories can be fickle, returning unwanted at an inopportune moment, or desperately out of reach when needed. To be honest, it's hard for me to remember my childhood, not because I can't, but because I can remember all too well. It's easier for me to think about the nightmare I found myself trapped in than to think about how full of feeling I had been. The numbing began when we moved to a house the next rung down on the social housing ladder, and a housing estate that scarred everybody who lived there, one way or another.

## Chapter 2 – Wounds

There are places like it in every town and city across the world. Whether it's a housing estate, a high rise, a block of flats or a ghetto, the demographic is pretty much the same. Overcrowding, unemployment, poverty, drug abuse and violence are the obvious, stand-out problems afflicting such places. Having lived in it for so long, and from what I can see, the common thread that seems to run through it all is boredom, tinged with a frustrated resentment that's soaked into the bone.

My parents had gotten back together, but we were moving to this place and my world was ending. Kids like me didn't do so well in housing estates like this one. If you wore glasses, they were taken. If you weren't loud, you were quietly beaten. I was afraid of moving there, and so I started spending almost all my time alone in my room. The problem with small towns is that everybody likes to think they know everybody, especially if they've been in the spotlight for more than five minutes. I had been one of the Von Trapp children in a play of *The Sound of Music*, playing for a week in the Town Hall some years before. The whole town had seen me sing while wearing dungarees made of curtains. During that week my parents broke up and my Dad moved out. I never sang again.

Alas, children are vicious in their cruelty, the jungle comes alive in their eyes and innocent laughter quickly adopts a derisive tone, mocking, a form of contempt, to stamp down forever the source, keeping it under heel. You may have guessed, but

I'm not somebody who laughs easily, and it's because I associate it with all the people I hated back then, and it truly was hatred. Two in particular, a brother and sister combination, persistent in harassing me whenever I left the house, became such a problem, that I had to be brought to a psychiatrist at fourteen years of age.

I had been living in fear of going outside for months in our new house. I didn't have a lot of friends, but I did like to walk around, listening to music on my disc-man. I also had a job, collecting glasses in a pub, so I was out at night a lot. This wasn't so unusual in Ireland at the time, all the work for younger people was part-time, cash in hand, and I used to do quite well, especially with found money and cigarettes at the end of a shift. But of course, this guy and his friends knew I had a

job and cigarettes, so I was constantly stopped and threatened by this crew of the worst kind of nasty little shits. If it wasn't him it was his sister and her gang of hissing bitches, laying into me seemingly out of nowhere, at any given time, literally attacking me on the street trying to rip clothes off me. The constant stress was becoming too much.

My anger had been quietly simmering for years, but I never really knew what to do with it or let it out. I would get all shaky and teary eyed, legs feeling leaden, so I had to quench it, stay unnoticed, or so I convinced myself at the time. The temper that runs in my family is infamous, but with me it seemed to twist and writhe. In a cold rage, I began to formulate a plan to take revenge on my bullies. I saved my money, and eventually had enough to fill two canisters from the fuel pumps at the entrance to the estate. I hid them in some nearby bushes, where I knew only sparse traffic would pass. My state of mind, I remember, was a total calm, every move confident and assured. My shoulders were light, my steps easy as I imagined their screams in the flames. I went home to prepare, to wait until everybody was asleep. My plan was to pour petrol into that house, and burn that guy, his sister and their parents alive. On some level, I felt bad, but only because I knew it would hurt my mother if I was found out. An understatement, I know, but my fourteen-year-old mind wasn't advanced enough to understand or care about consequences or how what you do affects others. I just wanted the fear and anger to stop, for the pain to go away.

I had taken to carrying a knife with me for protection, though I had never needed to use it. That night, as I waited in my room, something snapped in my head. How it began, I can't really recall, but the knife in my hand was suddenly running down the skin of my arm, and the pain felt good. It's hard to describe the sensations as the pain within met the pain without, uncontrollable tears, helpless shaking shoulders, as I slashed my arms again and again. The knife wasn't particularly sharp, making the wounds messier, more bruised. I shook and rocked back and forth holding myself for a while, a few hours I guess, blood caked onto my arms. It was the first time I went into what would become a familiar catatonic trance. When I blank out like this, I'm aware of what is happening around me, but I find myself unable to respond or react in any way. It's like I'm outside myself, incapable of making anything connect.

I had enough love and respect for my mother that when I finally snapped out of it, I was able to tell her something about how I was feeling, and we agreed it might be good for me to see a doctor. I had scared her badly, I could tell, and it only made me feel worse about everything. Guilt is a monster, that only grows more monstrous over time. My GP at the time, unprepared and under-staffed, sent me on to the recently opened mental health department, based on the old hospital grounds at the edge of town. So began my journey through the mental health service. It would be ten years before I had a say in my own life again.

## Chapter 3 – Medication

I have to say, first of all, on the subject of medication for the alleviation of a mental health condition, I have nothing against its use as long as it's effective. I've met a lot of people over the years who have sworn by whatever they were prescribed, and they seemed to be reasonably content, functional adults. The problems I encountered with medication, well, there were several external factors to consider, largely of my own making. Alcohol, drugs, the emotional shitstorm that is puberty, the struggle to fit in to a particularly nasty environment, the making of friends and enemies. Also, the fact was that Ireland was slow to provide effective and adequate treatment for vulnerable people of any kind, as has been well documented. Recent years have seen some improvements, but the attitudes among some staff and so-called professionals that I witnessed, those attitudes remain in places everywhere to this day, to the detriment of hapless patients.

My first trip was to the local hospital's first child psychologist, who to be fair seemed really nice. She listened as I tortured out my story of what had happened with the knife, and the bullying. I was asked if I heard voices or felt compelled and all sorts of other questions my mind was not capable of answering. Quiet words between my mother and the doctor, let's schedule another appointment, shall we? I think I did see her once again, but at that point the depression and self-harm had become more severe, my behaviour more erratic, so I was referred to the adult psychiatrist, who set me on varying courses of medication before settling on one that seemed to make a difference.

I had been making new friends as I got older, during those school years. Some of my most cherished memories involve people and places from that time period. Our little gang would get together combining our stashes of booze and drugs. Petty vandalism and theft, fight clubs on the beach, but always music and good times, we were harmless. A bunch of misfits for the most part, who didn't fit with any other group or clique, lasting bonds were made back then that remain to this day, a story, perhaps, for another time. My relationships with my friends were always marred for me, the shadow of mental illness shrouding everything. There were incidents at school, resulting in me missing class time. Some mornings, I would have to leave

school for a time to go to appointments with a running order of counsellors, therapists, psychiatrists and psychologists, or for the administration of medication. It always kept me at a distance from people. Too many times along the way I saw the aftermath of one of my blackouts, or the look of horror in people's eyes when they found me with blood trickling down my arms.

Something quite dramatic happened when I was sixteen that allowed me and my family a reprieve of sorts. We welcomed my little sister into the world, and she helped change all our lives for the better. I don't like to imagine where we'd all be now if she hadn't been born. I remember holding her in my arms, blood still drying into my arms under my sleeves, and just bawling my eyes out in front of my parents when they brought her home. I couldn't explain to them, I've never been great at talking about my emotions, especially with those closest to me. After that night, I never cut myself again, and for that I have a tiny pink object to thank.

My parents didn't want to raise a baby in that estate, having seen how living there was affecting me and my brothers, so we moved to the countryside, a small housing estate, newly built in the middle of nowhere. An area near where my Dad grew up on my grandfather's farm, our family have been settled there for generations. The peace and quiet of the new surroundings were a welcome change for all of us. I wasn't self-harming anymore and had been through around four different courses of anti-depressants at this point, all sparked by various outbursts or breakdowns along the way. Nothing was working for me, I was always having trouble sleeping, and would drink alone in my room or take painkillers to help me sleep. I'd take a palm full of max strength flu tablets at night and still be stoned in school the next morning, having barely gotten out of bed. I'd steal bottles of vodka from a nearby supermarket and drink one down, all before nine in the morning, puking my guts out in the school toilets an hour later, selling the rest of the vodka to buy hash when I could.

Twice, I ended up taking the wrong painkillers, mystery pills from the cupboard, resulting in my Dad rushing me to hospital, my heart racing, not knowing whether I'd die on the way. I just had no damn common sense; I didn't care enough, and I hated myself for it. Wanting to die and not knowing why, everything was pointless, everyone an irritation. My psychiatrist at the time, a man I should never have let into my head, was pushing for yet another change in meds as I was finishing school in 2002. A combination of new anti-depressants as well as an anti-psychotic injection, to be administered fortnightly in the bum. What a shining future lay ahead of me, I would think, a burden to everyone around me, trapped behind a mask of screaming emotion and numbed intelligence. Everyone else seemed to know or have an opinion on how I should live or what was good for me. I couldn't help thinking after my first injection, why has nobody asked me what I think would be best for me?

Independent thoughts like that diminished quickly after a month or so of injections. In a way it worked. I wasn't depressed. I wasn't angry. I wasn't happy. I wasn't anything. The medication just seemed to suck all the fight right out of me.

Any time I tried to break loose by going for drinks or smoking some joints, any attempt to socialise normally resulted in disaster, with me doing and saying terrible things that I would have no memory of the next day but everyone else would never forget. There were plenty of people who would have been much happier with me had I just kept taking my meds, and stayed out of sight, another drooling zombie left insensate by a cruel world, and isn't it a pity? Isn't it a shame? I fought the medication constantly, trying to retain my personality, to remind people around me that I was their friend. Sadly, my enthusiasm could only be sparked by alcohol, and throughout everything, as friends started to drift away, to move on, while I worked at a steel factory and drank all my wages, my enthusiasm diminished, leaving only a bitter taste in my mouth.

The friendships I had built with people began to crumble. My girlfriend at the time, who had stuck through a lot of crap from me, ended up leaving me after an ill-fated night out with my family, where I got so drunk I lashed out at everyone around me with words that dripped venom, culminating in a huge argument between me and my father at home. When one of my few remaining friends came to me with bruises and stories about her physically abusive partner, it became clear I wasn't quite ready for the real world. It all collapsed on me, a rage, the burning rage of the bullied victim, the helpless onlooker, my anger was boiling and all the medication I was on wasn't enough anymore. This abusive partner of hers was a scumbag, an absolute monster who liked to threaten everybody, especially me when he realised I knew what he had done. In my head, it was simple, destroy the cancer before it spreads. I wanted to cut him into tiny pieces and then piss on his remains. It was something of a shock to realise I held all this potential violence in me, but then we all do, and it is only words on paper that stop us from embracing the beast, the small child inside us all who would happily burn down the world of adults and their rules, the enforced compliance, the fallacy of traditions, the great loop that sees us repeating the same mistakes, passing on the same tired rhetoric of competition, the idea that someone must win and someone must lose. It was disheartening, having read the history from a young age, of every culture and civilization I could learn about, I could see and understand the world around me only too well. Any time I tried to envision a future worth caring about, the images fell flat, decaying already with the rot of failed practices, human greed, the passing on of hatred to children and how at every twist and turn, a cabal of wealthy, entitled shits grew fat on the labours of everyone else, all believing they have control despite never having a choice. I was depressed because the world horrified me if I'm to be truly honest. My choices, at 21 years of age, seemed to be stay myself and suffer a lifetime of gnawing

self-awareness, or to bury my thoughts the way other people do, engaging in the countless distractions designed to keep people subdued, unthinking, pumping out babies and spending money. It would be easy, I would just have to forget everything

I knew, and become compliant, unquestioning, eager to buy the latest model, to establish my self-important status as one in a sea of billions. I chose to be myself, and so the rage built until it burst, and I ended up in a catatonic state again. Not trusting myself to speak to anyone but the psychiatrist at this point, I was able after some difficulty to explain what I was feeling and that I was scared I was going to do something terrible. He recommended some time in a psychiatric hospital, diagnosing me as suffering from depression, bipolar disorder, and paranoid schizophrenia, which all sounded very serious. So, I complied and was plied with Valium in a locked downward in the psychiatric department of a bigger hospital nearby for the first month. Defeated, unable to reassemble the pieces of my mind, deemed a danger to myself and others, and so that's what I became.

## Chapter 4 – Hospitalisation

That first month in the locked down ward was an eye-opening experience. Men and women had to be separated, because of the prevalence of serial masturbators and genuinely unhinged people. Scream and giggles would erupt at random, and at any time you could be stopped and harassed. I was woken one night by a furious man, suffering from dementia, demanding that I get back into the kitchen and make him some soup. One of the women would throw anything she could get her hands on at nurses and patients alike, nearly starting a riot with only a hairdryer one day. Some people had rooms to themselves, either too violent or too anxious to be allowed to mingle.

My psychiatrist was an infuriating man, who responded with “*Alright? Okay?*”, like a mantra at the end of every sentence. “*99% of people don’t have a problem with drinking or smoking cannabis, alright? Okay? But you’re in that 1%, alright? Okay? So, you need to stop these behaviours, alright? Okay? And to help you do that I’m going to increase the dosage on your medication, alright? Okay? And if we see no improvement, we’ll try you on something different, alright? Okay?*” The same bullshit he had been spewing at me for five years, telling me what was wrong with me, instead of asking me any questions. But I had no willpower left at this stage, and as the Valium became more of a routine, I lost all sense of myself and became just another patient for the experts to scratch their heads over in confusion. Having caused no trouble in that first month, it was deemed reasonable for me to be moved to the more socially acceptable ward, where I could have visitors other than my parents. I never did forget the feeling of being trapped in a cage, like some kind of lab experiment. I still get panicky and shaky when I have to go to a hospital or doctors to this day.

I spent another month in the unlocked ward where I got to know a lot more of the patients in there with me. Some were like me, with depression, anger issues and problems with substance abuse. Others took me by surprise, like a stunning girl suffering from anorexia who would swear to you she was overweight and ugly before running away in tears, or the father of five in the bed next to mine who was receiving electro-shock therapy. I had to help him remember my name, and even the names of his family members when they came to visit him after a session. Like I

said, the approach to mental health in Ireland has only improved in recent years, and back then electrocuting people was still deemed an effective treatment for everything from bipolar disorder to anxiety. I was just glad I managed to avoid that particular form of health care.

So many others I met in there, their stories have all stayed with me, and it was crushing to realise how many of us are simply cast aside because we can't adjust to society's stringent demands. The people I spoke to were highly imaginative and creative individuals, with fantastic perspectives on life and politics that would always delight or amuse me. I would write for hours, documenting everything, keeping a journal when I could. These were my natural talents and I was encouraged to utilise them as much as possible in my rehabilitation. Eventually I would grasp those talents and use them for my own benefit, but I wasn't very capable at the time. An overwhelming fear of being kept in that place forever spurred me into acting, so I could escape and get on with my life, fractured as it was. I had been in there long enough to know it wasn't for me, none of it, doctors, medication or therapy. I realised that I was the only one who could fix me, and I couldn't do that with people telling me otherwise.

Considered a special case, I remember my psychiatrist getting very excited about my swift improvement, so much so that a room full of psychiatrists and medical students was assembled to observe me and contribute questions as I was grilled extensively on whether I still felt an urge to kill myself or other people, how often my mood changed, how often I piss at night, how much sleep I got, any voices in my head or a fascination with fire. It was terrifying, but I had performed on stage before, singing in front of my whole hometown with all lights on me, and so the interview concluded to everybody's satisfaction. I was to be released in two weeks, with my dosage of meds to be gradually lowered to help me adjust when I got home. I knew I still had my problems, but I also knew they weren't going to be solved in that place by those people. Enough, enough! Get me out of here, I thought, not realising it would be a lot more difficult than I believed to fix myself. The first step would be to get off the medication, which invariably left me a zombie, a sheep, passively existing, herded into a state of incessant chewing, screaming out from behind glazed eyes, unable to string more than three sentences together before fading out into unintelligible muttering. If it wasn't for my friends, I might never have gotten rid of the stuff. There were a few people who were there for me in that time, understanding of the riot that was going on in my brain. And I'll never forget their disappointment as I gradually replaced my meds with drink and drugs. The weight of failed expectations piled up and up until the weight ceased to matter.

## Chapter 5 – Cold Turkey

The first thing I noticed after returning home from hospital was how differently everybody acted around me. The second thing I noticed was how limited in my freedom I had now become as a result of everyone knowing I had spent time in a “loony bin”. I can look back now and be realistic about it, small towns breed small minds or the whole, “it was a different time back then” argument. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that it still hurt, to feel eyes on me, to hear whispers and not know if it was real or whether I really was insane. I didn’t know how to act around others as a result. If I wasn’t shuffling around home in a zombified stupor, I was drinking all my dole money or engaging in small time dealing. Things got out of control. Scary people showed up at the door of our house looking for money from me. I was an irresponsible asshole.

Going cold turkey on the medication, I stopped going to the psychiatrist completely, started a new job and moved back to town, sharing a flat with my best friend at the time. I was determined to not mess it up, to prove to everyone that I was perfectly sane, and nobody needed to stop talking when I entered a room, nobody needed to look at me with pity in their eyes, nobody needed to ask other people how I was doing. For a while, it seemed I was successful. Mark and I had some great times in that flat, and every step I took later can be traced back to that year in 2007. If a single thing had happened differently, I might not be alive or where I am today.

One morning I woke up with the strangest feeling in my head, and I started writing, just random lines into an empty journal, haphazardly littering the pages with quotes, lyrics and graffiti. This simple scribbling turned into a group project of sorts. Friends would call by and we’d all get drunk and stoned, always with music blasting somewhere. A lot of those lads were and remain to this day, talented musicians, and I wish them well, wherever they are. Everybody contributed in some way to this book that became a work of art in itself. We described it as a book of chaos, an attempt to record every extremity of emotion. If nothing else, I thought of it as a damning indictment of the mental health service and the attitudes towards patients, the simplifying of complex behaviours through labelling and denial. Here

was all the proof I needed that I was capable of moving on from depression, if only through creativity, to use the anger and misery for something useful. Anything other than just eating myself from the inside.

What goes up, must come down eventually, and having ridden a high of relative freedom after stopping the pills and injections, things slowly degenerated. It was never enough for me, always another drink, another joint. I woke up once with blood still pumping from an open wound on my hip, still no idea how it happened. It became a routine to wake up bruised, with apologies to make to whoever I had sent messages to in my torpor or whoever had been unlucky enough to bump into the seething, vicious creature it seems I become at my worst. I really have felt on occasion, that there is some other presence behind my eyes, just waiting for me to slip up. Back then, I was trying to drown my memories of the hospital, my feelings of displacement, the knowledge that I was hurting everyone around me. I wanted to stay miserable because it had grown comfortable, strange as that might seem to some. I lost a lot of friends in that time, or more precisely, I drove a lot of friends away. My friendship with Mark soured, I was behind on rent, having drank it all and the arguments just got messier.

It all peaked, I guess, when my grandfather died. My Dad's side of the family all came together in an unprecedented gathering of emotions, and it was all just too much for me. I decided to move home and re-evaluate my situation, having promised my grandfather that I was going to go to college and do something with my writing in a private moment before he died. We weren't particularly close, but I'll never forget the strength of that grip and the steadiness in his eyes, though his breathing was laboured. He couldn't speak, but the squeeze of his hand remained with me, hands that had worked the land for so many years. I needed a fresh start, so I applied for a Media Production course in the nearby city of Cork, with notions of becoming a journalist. At 24, I was returning to education as a mature student, with all the necessary supports in place to help me progress. I couldn't have asked for more opportunity. Like every other event in my life to this point however, I seemed to do so well, before crashing horribly, but obviously, it's all a learning curve.

## Chapter 6 – Highs and Lows

Moving to a new place, even one an hour's drive away, was a big deal for me at the time. I had tried unsuccessfully to move to the Netherlands before I was hospitalised. It was embarrassing that I only lasted a few weeks, but I had been too young and not really prepared enough for such a move at the time. It had always been a fear that I'd be stuck in my hometown forever, and the idea that I could go somewhere else and be somebody else was very appealing, though rarely encouraged. I moved into a shared house near the college I would be attending. My housemates were an older Estonian woman and two Latvians nearer to my age. Part of a wave of Eastern Europeans who had been drawn to Ireland during the economic boom in the 90s, many of them had settled in well to Irish society and had built lives for themselves and their families, often from nothing. They treated me with more respect and kindness than I had ever seen from Irish people.

Living with them helped me to become more open and communicative, which was a big help at college, where there was a fantastic range of people from all walks of life. Everything felt new and exciting, and during those first few months I was struck by a wave of creativity and wrote around sixty poems. Nothing spectacular, just lots of ideas, but they received praise from my peers and my lecturers, whereas at home my writing had been met with derision and mocking laughter. While I was getting to know the city at first, I bumped into Mark's ex-girlfriend and we ended up hitting it off and getting close for a while. Nothing serious, we both agreed, but I should have told Mark. I didn't really think it would be a problem, our friendship had been stale for a while, but when he found out about it from somebody else, well, our friendship ended. There was a heated argument in front of several of the rest of the old gang, where it was made clear that I wasn't welcome anymore. Over time, as more of my offers to friends to visit me in Cork went unanswered, I started drinking in earnest.

You might wonder why anyone would keep going back to alcohol after it had caused so much damage, but that's not an easy one to answer. As an Irish person, you're always expected to be able to drink wherever you go, and the lure is all the

more tempting when you're young and single. Every night out back then was extreme, all shots and lines and joints. It was 2008 and Obama had just won the presidency in America. There was a great sense of jubilation at the time, people got carried away, I guess, but everybody was out and celebrating all the time, or so it seemed. I certainly got caught up in it all, and for a while it was great, liberating, being able to discard my old life, with its sad memories and doctors and medication. To enjoy the company of all the new friends I was making, and the confidence they gave me.

In retrospect, it may have been a little too much confidence too fast. Mark's ex had taken off for Africa to do charity work, and I had been upset about it. I binged relentlessly outside of classes, scraping through my first year in a permanent state of intoxication. I lost track of how many house parties I ended up at with random strangers, or what I said or who I slept with. My second year would prove too much for me to take. The focus was on radio broadcasting, and while I enjoyed doing my own music show and reading out news, I knew I didn't have the discipline required to be successful in radio or as a journalist. The act was beyond me, and I was pissed off with myself frankly, for having wasted my own time. Depression long held at bay through the art of drinking was beginning to creep into my mindset again. I drank to get drunk and then kept drinking. Whiskey, vodka, bourbon, cider or beer, it didn't matter, I'd puke it up and keep going. Weed and cannabis had become difficult to obtain, some prolonged dry period, where someone big had been raided. On some level, aware of my vices, I tried to limit the damage when I could. Legal highs were a big thing back then, and so I experimented with them when I couldn't get any real weed. For the most part it helped to keep me away from alcohol, but it was all part of a greater spiral that was getting out of control, that manifested itself through anxiety.

My first panic attack hit me like a ton of bricks, out of nowhere, while walking through the city one winter day. Unsure of what was happening at first, I had gotten very lightheaded and short of breath, I thought I just needed to sit down and rest. I went into a nearby pub where I was known and ordered a pint. I was trying to stay calm as my symptoms got worse. Sweat poured out of me, as I grew weaker, finding it harder to breath. My chest felt like it was going to burst. I tried calling out for help as it became apparent I needed more than rest, but my voice was a rasping whisper and my flailing arms were ignored by the few oblivious patrons. I was able to call emergency services myself on my phone, and by the time they got there I was barely conscious. A stretcher was brought in and I was carried out and taken to hospital.

Some morphine and a significant stretch of time later, it was explained to me that I had had a massive panic attack, which was only made worse as I kept panicking. I had come close to forcing a stroke, which was why they kept me under observation until late that night. Needless to say, my housemates were upset and

worried for me when I arrived home with ECG sucker pads still attached to me. All I could think was, it was nice while it lasted. All I could see was this mental nightmare, intent on hounding me for the rest of my days. No matter how far I ran or what I tried, this malevolence in my head wasn't going anywhere. Eventually, I had to drop out of the course and move home again. Assignments had been failed or missed too often, so I had nothing to show for any of it in the end. Of course, when you fail at something, other people seem to love reminding you of it. My failure was taken more personally by others than me it seemed. The familiar words, "well you tried that before and look where it got you", became the story of my life for a while after I returned home. People would try to help me to be just like everyone else, and it just made me cry all the harder.

## Chapter 7 – Potential

One of the things that had drawn a lot of attention from adults when I was a teenager, in the earlier days of my mental health problems, was my artwork. I used to fill notebooks and sketch pads with pictures of dark landscapes, monsters of every possible description, violence, religious blasphemy, the usual attention-grabbing nonsense. I stopped drawing pictures after one of the various therapy sessions that the school had arranged for me, having been caught reeking of vodka and spew at ten in the morning. The therapist was some form of eager Christian, advising me that Jesus could alleviate my symptoms if I would only let him into my heart. I drew a picture of her nailed to a cross, ravens pecking at bruised and torn skin. She must have complained to the school, as I never saw her again, but a different creative outlet was made available as a result.

My English teacher at the time, who has sadly since passed, was aware of my troubles and was always encouraging me in my studies. It was the only subject I performed well in, easy and confident with all assignments. After the disaster with the therapist, I had grown bored and despondent with artwork, and instead tried my hand at writing poems, song lyrics and short stories. There was an announcement in class one day about a competition open to all students. Anyone was welcome to put pen to paper and submit entries for a collection of poetry from students all over the country, on their hopes and fears for the upcoming millennium. With my teacher's help, I had my first poem published in that collection, which wasn't bad for a troubled sixteen-year-old.

My worsening depression kept me from writing much more after that however, until the book of chaos with Mark and the poems that poured out of me in waves when I moved to Cork. That writing was all I really had to show for my efforts, despite the car full of stuff as my mother drove me home having failed at college, soaked in sweat from the abrupt sobriety. It was going to be a crowded house for a while, as both of my brothers happened to be back living at home too. The global recession had kicked in and work was becoming very scarce around my hometown, so everybody was budgeting up. Determined to do something with the writing that had generated such enthusiasm from teachers and peers alike, I searched for ways to

improve on the poetry, submitting them for online competitions and such. They were largely rejected or ignored. I found myself joining an online forum of writers that seemed to be based in Ireland. Professional and amateur writers would submit their works and gain honest feedback and constructive criticism for the most part, enabling people like myself to improve and figure out where I was going wrong. It turned out to be a good way of making friends and meeting interesting people, before the more mainstream social media took over everything.

One of those friendships turned into something a bit more at the time. A more experienced woman with a fascinating life, helped me to connect with publishers who could get my stuff out there, among other things. It never lasted, both of our lives being too complicated at the time, but she had helped me to rebuild some confidence in myself, enough that I was proud of my writing. It took away significant levels of tension, like peeling layers, to sit and write, filling pages. Three poems had been published in an American anthology of international poetry, but I still had a folder full of unedited and unpublished material, ideas, lines and drafts. My life was about to change very dramatically, and those words would have to stay hidden a while longer before their potential could be fulfilled. I had yet to be completely broken, you see.

## Chapter 8 – Moving On

The writing was all well and good, but obviously, I was unemployed again. I still drank, although noticeably not as much, a few beers at night with a movie mostly. I smoked weed more instead, staying safe and numbed in a hazy bubble, focusing on ways to get the panic attacks under control. They had only grown in frequency and being back home had made them worse, more unpredictable. I had one good friend left from my old factory job, who lived nearby with his family. Just hanging out with Seamie and doing normal things like playing video games and ranting about the state of society helped me in so many ways. Just someone to talk to who didn't look at me like I was some kind of mutant when I did choose to speak. A better alternative to stumbling out of pubs in the middle of the day at the least.

My parents and my siblings, we were all having a difficult time of it, and I think now, my worst crime at this point was not taking more notice of the people closest to me. We made the most out of it though, watching movies together and playing video games, everyone helped around the house to make life as simple as possible. Simple was becoming more complicated all the time, but there were so many days and nights where our house was filled with laughter. Our collective sense of humour would shine and the problems of our lives could be forgotten momentarily. We were always reminded of our love for each other.

Global recession had taken a toll everywhere, but rural Ireland and the smaller cities and towns outside of Dublin took an awful hammering at the time. The mood on the streets and in bars was becoming nasty, bitter, always bad news. People began emigrating in a steady and increasing stream. The government had let the people down, record numbers left in an astonishingly short period of time, disgusted with the country that had let them down. My parents were talking about moving to Australia, and soon our house became a flurry of online activity and printing paper. My brothers, one a mechanic, the other a carpenter, both had healthy grounds for visa applications, so they just went for it. I had no such solid ground, and was hopelessly unemployed in any case, but soon plans were being readied. My parents were determined to follow when they could, or failing that, find an alternative like

New Zealand. Everybody started selling everything, cars, furniture, kitchenware, old toys from the attic, our childhood memories. As much money as was possible to gather was gathered, to be ready as soon as the go-ahead came through from the online agencies. I kept remembering my failed attempts at moving to new places, and I was very unsettled and very much in denial about the whole thing. I never thought it would happen for my parents, in denial about them leaving at all, and I was going to miss my brothers. None of it felt real.

I was fortunate enough to get a good GP when I took a chance on seeing a doctor again. The panic attacks were preventing me from thinking straight or walking around in public with any confidence. One sit down and a chat about what was physically happening to my body during an attack, was enough to solve one problem at least. A simple breathing exercise with a ritual loosening of the shoulders sorted that issue and I've never had an attack since. My joy was short-lived, as two days later we held a going away party for my two brothers. They flew out the next day with ferocious hangovers, and the emotional shock was just as ferocious for all of us as we moved on and went our separate ways.

## Chapter 9 – Other Lands

*M*y brothers went on to do quite well, spending two years working on an algae farm in Western Australia. My own path was to take a very different turn. I had been in touch with Laura, Mark's old ex who had ended up living in Glasgow, Scotland. Sympathetic to my plight, she presented me with the option of moving there to look for work, with a spare couch to sleep on. My parents time was now fully invested in moving to New Zealand, so I figured I had nothing to lose by taking up the offer. With two weeks' worth of dole money, I took off for Glasgow, never expecting things to go the way they did. It broke my heart to say goodbye to my parents and sister, and by the time I landed I was nervous and struggling to maintain a wall around my emotions. I was still trying to absorb the fact that my family was all broken up again, uncertain on when I might see them again.

It probably wasn't the best time to start a relationship with Laura, who was now raising a son from her previous relationship. The funny, care-free girl I had known in Cork was a knot of stresses and anxieties, though I didn't know it at first. It was all very rushed, and with the best of intentions, but two damaged people not yet done with damaging do not make a happy couple, and we both hurt each other a lot in the years we struggled to keep the relationship going. Now I can see that we were both feeling a bit abandoned and resentful of the world, taking it out on each other instead, the guilt dragging us back every time. It was all just a very regretful mess.

One night, when I had moved into my own place to give us breathing space, I had been texting her while drinking, which is just never a good idea. It was all just bitterness at this stage, petty threats and insults flying back and forth. Some misguided attempt to help me, or malicious intent, I'll never know, but police woke me later that night kicking my door in. I was informed, in my dishevelled, hungover state that they had gotten a call claiming I was in danger of taking my own life and would have to be taken for psychiatric evaluation to determine whether I had taken any dangerous substances. I tried desperately to explain my situation but the empty bottles and cans evident around me didn't do me any favours. In that deliberately obtuse manner that cops have, my protestations were met with calm bemusement as

I was ushered inexorably, into a fully flashing police car outside my house at two in the morning.

I had been doing alright. The relationship had grown ugly sure, but I was working hard in Glasgow University's kitchens, getting decent hours as a kitchen porter. It was there I met some of the kindest people, some of the most amazing friends I ever made in my life, and I worked hard to be counted among them. I was made to feel more welcome than I had ever felt in Ireland, but that night put a stop to any progress. I didn't know where I was going to end up, shaking and sweating all the way to the hospital. Every attempt at logical or reasonable conversation was met with a placating response, like I was actually insane. I knew the tone well, from the voices of all my former doctors and counsellors, whose faces I could see in my mind, as the faces of the roaming demented passed us by in the endless corridors of some ward in a hospital that I wasn't familiar with in the slightest. For four hours, I sat in a chair with two infuriating police officers for company, waiting to see a doctor. Even the cops had to admit after two hours, that had I taken anything I'd be dead by now, or at least unwell. But, protocol, a shrug of the shoulders. The doctor was a guy my age, looking just as tired as I felt, who asked me a series of questions to which I answered 'No'. He ticked some boxes, took my signature and let me go.

My anxiety returned, and I became reclusive. It got so bad, I ended up taking time off work, time I ended up drinking with a vengeance. There are a few stand-out occasions where I very nearly drank myself to death throughout the course of my life. This was one of them. I didn't care anymore. My family were all now living on the other side of the world and it was looking like I might not see them again. I had failed at everything, and it seemed that Christmas would be my last. It very nearly came to that but for the support from some good friends and a phone call with my brother. A life can take so many twists and turns, the multitude of choices seeming to make no sense. That New Year's Eve, my brother called me while I was walking home from the pub. I poured out the whole horrible story, how miserable I'd been, anxious and paranoid, blaming myself for a failed relationship. My brother was horrified and offered a kindness I could never hope to match, a way out.

He was able to help me arrange a working holiday visa for New Zealand, with the idea being to surprise my parents and sister, who were now living in Christchurch. I slowed the drinking enough to be functional and able to say goodbye to all the fantastic friends I had made. Glasgow gave me an emotional send-off, and on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, after a grueling flight, I arrived in Christchurch dehydrated, emaciated, but alive and reunited with my family. It made everybody so happy, and I honestly believed at first that I might be able to turn my life around in this new country. My brothers ended up moving there too, bringing us all together again after nearly four years apart. I spent that year learning to use a press brake at a large steel

factory, bending metal parts into different shapes, and trying to repair the broken bridges between myself and my family.

New Zealand is a beautiful country, and I might have stayed longer if I hadn't gotten back in contact with Laura, who was willing to give things another try, having had counselling. It's a foolish thing to look back on now, my reasoning of the situation, the strange guilt I felt, twisting me up inside, making my own family seem unnatural to me. Which was nonsense, of course, but the indecision and displacement gnawed at me at the time, until I had a very public nervous breakdown. The catatonic state I was found in frightened my mother, my sister and my brothers. It had been a long time since I had ended up in such a state, unresponsive, unable to move. I was back to hurting those around me, I couldn't decide what to do because either decision would damage someone. I wanted to do what I felt was right for me, even though my family wouldn't understand. In not wanting to break any more hearts, I ended up breaking everyone's heart anyway. I chose to return to Glasgow to try again with Paula, because at least if I broke down again, it wouldn't be in front of my family. It's difficult to describe the mindset I was in without sounding a little mad. Though it filled my heart to leave my family again, a sense of excitement and freedom trickled through. New Zealand had been nice, but I had never felt like I belonged there. The earthquakes were quite off-putting too, if I'm to be honest. With the blind eagerness of a child who knows no better, I got back on a plane.

## Chapter 10 – Failed Expectations

Things seemed pretty hopeful at first when I got back to Glasgow. Laura seemed much happier and more stable, and I was able to hit the ground running, getting a job nearly straight away at a plastics factory that had seen better days. We moved in to a one bedroom flat together, and for a while everything seemed fine. Several problems began to surface simultaneously, however. The job was driving me crazy. The foreman of the factory was an insufferable little shit with a puffed-up impression of his own importance. Every day was a series of jabs at how everything you were doing was wrong, no matter how it was done. There were three of us who took shit from that man for about four months. As far as I know, one of them may still be there. One day, I just couldn't go in and face another minute in that place. I was being worn down mentally at work, and at this point I was going home to more mental torture, as the old anxieties and issues we had had before bubbled back up. I managed to swing a cash in hand job cleaning and refurbishing old hoovers at a shop with sane and laid-back co-workers which helped to alleviate some of the stress for a while. We had just gathered enough money to move into a new house with more space when my work dried up. Laura had her own stresses and quit her course on the same day, so neither of us had any income at the end of a tumultuous week. My solution was to get drunk as often as possible, another proud moment. Neither of us was mentally equipped for the situation, it wasn't supposed to have happened like this. I would shut down and not speak, or just leave. She would scream, and rant or cry, all in front of her son, who we had, for better or worse, tried to raise together along with the support of his father for nearly four years. That kid went through a hell of a lot, and I couldn't help but feel responsible.

One morning, we had an argument about furniture. I went off drinking for the day and refused to look at my phone. I think now, that I had just had enough, and I didn't know how to deal with it all. Knowing what I had left behind in New Zealand and having no back-up plan for things not working out, it all just seemed so damned pointless. I arrived home that night to find my scant belongings stuffed into bin bags outside a locked door. This was too much, I didn't really believe what was happening. I sat next to my bags after she refused to let me in, in a bit of a daze. All I

could hear were the muffled snarls of rage through the door, and when the flashing lights of a police car showed up, I thought sanity was going to be restored to the situation, and I would at least be able to sleep. But no, they were there to remove me from the premises. I informed them that I had nowhere else to go and that I was paying rent there, but it didn't matter. I was taken to a night shelter and left there with my bin bags, whereupon my phone died. The shelter receptionist then informed me that they had no rooms to spare, and that my best bet would be a hostel. A hostel proved too costly for a man who had drunk most of his money during the day. I didn't know what part of the city I was in, so I wandered until I figured things out. I was homeless for a few weeks, sleeping at shelters or on friends' couches when I could. My luck turned when I ran into an old friend that I had met at a party some years before. She was able to offer me a more stable solution for a few weeks, which helped me sort things like charging my phone, contacting people about my situation, eating actual food and getting real sleep, instead of the wretched freezing damp of whatever hovel I could find for a night.

Thanks to Gemma, I was able to arrange a place to stay and a fresh start for myself in London. We became better friends during that time I stayed on the couch in her living room. It's important to note, that at this point I was an absolute mess. The depression that I had unsuccessfully tried to drown in alcohol had become all-consuming, and it was difficult to even sit in a room with me. I couldn't be consoled, but it didn't stop Gemma from trying. There was a chemistry there, but she was in a relationship and had a whole other life going on, while I was a depressed, homeless person, with the remarkable ability to suck all the life and humour out of a room. She reminded me that I had met some great people in my travels, and that maybe I had more going on than clinging to a failed relationship with my former best friend's ex-girlfriend. One of those great people was Steve, a friend I had made in Cork through a mutual love of weed and fantasy fiction. He had settled in London and was happy to put me up where he was staying in Wandsworth. Thanking Gemma, I said goodbye once again to Glasgow, and got on a train for London.

## Chapter 11 – Hard Work

London was a much bigger place than I was used to living in. It seemed to take forever to get to Wandsworth, between trains and buses and me not having a clue about how anything worked. It was a great relief to arrive at my destination to see my old friend again, same as ever, with a can of beer ready for me. Steve had been self-employed as a carpenter for several years, but living in London is expensive and it can be difficult to find a stable place to live in. The city council had a scheme to keep abandoned buildings from going to hell while they decided whether to sell or demolish. For around two hundred pounds a month, Steve was renting a former office space in an old family protection services building. It was a crazy, but cosy setup, with random people and travelers from all over the world living on every floor. Toilets, wash areas and kitchens were all communal, and could lead to interesting interactions at any given time of the day or night. I had a couch and a spacious office corner all to myself. I must commend Steve's patience with me at first. Happy as I was to see him again, I was an emotional wreck and not very fun to be around. With help from him and one of his friends, I figured out the transport system and landed a part time kitchen porter job. It took nearly an hour and a half to get to work two or three nights a week, where I got cash in hand or weed if I liked from a fantastic employer at a small restaurant. Things settled a little. I was able to take my mind off all the self-pity and self-loathing, and just work. It didn't matter what I was paid, I always worked hard for people who were fair with me.

After a few months, it became apparent that the clock was ticking on our cheap accommodation. The building was due to be destroyed, so we all had to find better jobs and our own places. I managed to secure a full-time kitchen porter job at a nearby hotel, where I met some of the craziest, hard-working people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Working there, you were made to feel part of a family, no matter where you were from or what your story was. The work was brutal at times, and I can only say I was proud to be able to keep up and hold my own. I managed to sort out a room in a flat-share relatively nearby as myself and Steve went our separate ways. In all this time, a good five months after leaving Glasgow, I still had the occasional contact with Laura, and every time I ended up drinking. Until our very

last conversation, where the last thing she said to me that I was a black hole, who would always absorb all the good and light in my life and negate it. I never texted her back after that, and I made a focused effort to cut my drinking. It's clear at this stage of the story, that drinking is my major weakness. In a drinking culture, a sober Irish person is viewed with suspicion and mistrust by their peers, so I had always given in and taken that drink, if only to try to fit in. Smoking always mellowed me, kept me stable. I had been waking up to a joint and a coffee for breakfast for fifteen years, and I was always quite functional until alcohol ruined everything. So, I smoked more, put in more hours at work, to make a point of being able to do it.

My new flat mates weren't impressed unfortunately, and after only a month I was asked to leave, only because the neighbours were complaining, which was fair enough, I guess. I had no time to find a new place on such short notice, but the managers at the hotel were kind to me, offering me a spare room in the manager suites on the top floor where some of them lived. It was strange to live where I worked for a while, but it gave me time to arrange for a proper room in a shared house in Tooting. I was much luckier with my neighbours and house mates this time around, and it seemed I was on a roll, making friends, getting high, talking about poetry, politics and the state of the world. I refused to spend any time thinking about

Laura, or my family, or the boiling surges of emotion that were constantly threatening to overwhelm me. I started to put in longer hours at work, mostly because our two other porters disappeared, leaving me to pick up the slack. I pushed myself, losing sleep, not eating enough, always moving and doing. An injury to my knee while carrying stock upstairs put me out of action for a few days. If I had known then what hassle it would cause later, and if I had the time, I might have gotten it checked on properly, but the x-ray I had taken showed no bone damage, so back to work I went.

I hit another setback a few weeks later when my hand got caught between two steel bins while I was cleaning, and the resulting gushing wound meant stitches and more time off work. Like some kind of force pushing me, I fell behind on my rent and eventually had to leave as a result. Exhausted, physically and mentally shattered, I decided I couldn't keep going like this. My wages were barely paying rent all along, and I'd have no wages if I worked myself to death. I began to explore other options, and it seemed all I could do at that point was move back to Ireland, where I at least had some family and friends. I had been very lucky up to this point and was lucky again when a friend from home offered a spare room while I got myself together. With a heavy heart for all the friends I would be leaving behind once again, I left London and went back to Ireland, to a bed instead of a couch, which was a nice change while it lasted. Home, however, wasn't quite the same place I had left six years before.

## Chapter 12 – Home Truths

Some very helpful people were able to provide places for me to stay while I looked for work. The idea was to find a job that wouldn't tax me as physically. My knee was a worry, as it was still prone to locking up unexpectedly every now and then, which was extremely painful and humbling at times. Call centre work seemed the only possibility from where I stood when I landed. I lasted about two months in the job, and with all due respect to anyone who can do that kind of work, I can honestly say I never felt as pathetic as I did at that point. After all I'd been through, being lectured by kids on how to maximize profits and sales with unwitting customers, was the last thing I needed. I had neither the confidence nor the patience for it, and so I left, returning to the state I seemed most comfortable in at home, unemployed.

I had a room in a house at this point and while the housemates were friendly enough, I found it very difficult to reconnect with the attitudes and humour of everyday life back home. It all seemed too small and confining. I did take the time to catch up with important people in my life, like my grandmothers, relatives, and my good friend Seamie, who had always remained in close contact since our days working together ten years before. There was a nostalgic edge to everything, made disquieting by the fact that my closest family were all still in New Zealand, waiting for residency applications to be approved. It was nice to see family at home, but I always felt I was imposing, like some unfortunate ghost that kept turning up, lost. I spent most of my time having quiet drinks, re-writing old poems, and trying to stay in touch with people online. The social media experience in general had become quite toxic at this point, and it was difficult to start conversations with anyone. What to talk about? How my entire life now fit in a suitcase, kept that way in case I ever had to leave in a hurry? How fascism was on the rise again, Brexit just approved, Trump in power in the US? Mostly I used it to video chat with my parents and brothers. The future looked so bleak, and for the first time in a long time I thought about when Laura called me a black hole, and for the first time I genuinely felt like one. There was no escaping this one, I had given up completely, defeated at last by my depression and the combination of events that had led me back to this place. I

was prepared for an unending cycle of mediocrity, perhaps dying in some dingy bar, as would be fitting. It's what I deserved for leaving my family behind, or so I thought at the time.

It wasn't until I got a message from Gemma over the Christmas of 2016, that it began to become clear, that all the events that had led me to that level of the bottom had all happened for a reason.

## Chapter 13 – The Rest of My Voice

It turned out Gemma was having a pretty terrible time herself, having just gotten out of a poisonous relationship. She was heading to Ireland for a break with one of her friends and wondered if I'd be able to show them around. The idea of one of the friends I had made along the way coming and visiting me seemed to snap the spell of gloom around me. I felt rejuvenated, cleaning the house and making arrangements for the visit. I couldn't quite understand why I felt so giddy. Gemma had been very kind to me in the past, and while we had fooled around and flirted quite a bit when we first met, I didn't really know her too well. The week before she arrived, the landlord dropped an unexpected bomb on us, with the news that he was selling the place and we would have three weeks to find new accommodation. This news nearly finished me if I'm honest, it was happening too soon to when Gemma was visiting, when I owed money for bills and loans. I just stayed focused on the visit and ignored the signs of impending homelessness looming over me once again.

The weekend before my birthday that year was the weekend that changed my life. Gemma and I discovered a connection between us that I had given up on finding. We shared a lot of history and secrets, cuddling a lot on the couch, and took a trip to Cork, which I hadn't been to since leaving in 2010. Strange how some things come full circle. Gemma had booked us a hostel for Cork, and when we arrived to check in, the first person I saw at the nearby bar was my old friend Mark. We hadn't spoken in seven years and I immediately panicked and ushered Gemma upstairs to our room. In that moment, it was as if all the stuff I had ever felt bad about, all the thoughtless stunts I had pulled, had come back to haunt me. Gemma is the first and only person who was able to talk me through it, calming me down. She didn't realise it at the time, but I was a step away from breaking down and going catatonic again. With some humour, understanding and a lot of listening, she brought me around.

We wandered the streets for a while, with me showing off some of my old haunts and bars I used to drink in. It was all changed of course, hipsters everywhere, the stench of food in every bar. Call me old-fashioned but I miss the old smoke-filled bar where the only food is crisps or peanuts. The bar at the hostel was our last port of call, and there was Mark again. With some coaxing from Gemma, I found myself

approaching him at the bar. The first thing he asked me was if I was still on that damned medication. From there, the conversation slowly took off. We were all quite drunk and Mark had friends with him, so it was great to be able to show Gemma a glimpse of how things used to be. We all stayed up into the long hours, smoking joints and sharing stories. It was the first night in what seemed forever that I felt truly relaxed and comfortable in my own skin. Mark and I hugged at the end of it all, sad to see it finish but overall much happier, I think. Closure of sorts, at least, and one bridge, perhaps the most important one, repaired at last.

My heart was absolutely broken when Gemma had to return to Glasgow, and so was hers. We had both had a profoundly positive experience together, like nothing I had ever felt before. I thought that this woman may very well be the rest of my voice, and though it had been a difficult and winding road to find her, just what the hell was I going to do about it? With eviction hanging over me, I decided it was time for one last roll of the dice. After some messages and a few arrangements, I set off for Glasgow with a week's worth of dole money and my suitcase of remaining worldly possessions. Turns out I had been in the right place; it just hadn't been the right time.

## Chapter 14 – Love and Poetry

*I*n March 2017, I arrived back in Glasgow, setting about the now familiar tasks of establishing a living situation with renewed vigor. Gemma and I were and remain to this day, very much head over heels in love. Within a month both of us moved into a new place together, working part-time jobs, while Gemma waited to return to University where she was studying Biology. My problems with depression and the guilt that hung over me for my past actions ceased to be a factor. I wasn't drinking, and I didn't want to. We would sit together and watch our favourite shows, setting the world to rights in our own little bubble. I have never felt so natural and comfortable in a person's presence.

One day I was rifling through my old poems and the book of chaos, which I had carried with me from country to country. Gemma took notice, and more importantly, encouraged me in my writing. I was able to explain to her that it had always helped me, how I found it easier to write than to talk, and I was shaken by her understanding and compassion. I poured all my effort into re-writing as much of that old poetry as I could, and I found myself reveling in it.

A month after we moved into the new place, I put together a collection of around thirty of those poems and created an eBook online and found I could use the same tools to self-publish my own paperbacks. I figured, why not put it out there? I wasn't interested in money, having for many years been distrustful of it. I just needed to get that writing out there, for the pain I gone through in those darker times to have meant something. For every poem I finished for publication I felt a little lighter, with less weight on my shoulders.

So, I had published my first book, met the love of my life who I was now sharing a flat with, what next? Well, I asked her to marry me a month later, and she said yes. The two of us are currently planning our wedding and life couldn't have worked out better. Even the old knee injury I picked up is finally getting seen to, having arranged for an MRI scan which revealed torn cartilage, the culprit that was causing my knee to randomly lock up. With a bit of surgery, it should be right as rain again. The injury allowed me to focus on the writing, and before I knew it, I had three poetry books available with my name on them, which drew overwhelming support from all the friends I had made and family alike.

Humbled, I had a strong sense of all that had brought me to this stage, where the soul-crushing emptiness of depression isn't constantly hanging over me. I thought of all the people out there suffering, and all the friends of mine who have themselves ended up on anti-depressants or seeing psychiatrists or therapists. I wanted to write something for those people, who may never see light at the end of the tunnel, or those who feel like it will never end. I also thought it might help put the poetry I've written into some kind of context.

My story is just one of millions, and I don't claim to be some expert, or to have a cure for depression or anxiety. I still get spells of it on rare occasions, proof of its voracity. I know that the state of the world around me made me worse, but the people I met made me better, more often than not. Listening to their stories, appreciating the true size and scale of the world and all its inhabitants, sharing tales of love and misery, the communication that has kept us alive and evolving, it made me feel compassion. True empathy was hard for me to feel when I was at my worst, but I believe it's what we all really need in this brutal age. A little understanding, some love and poetry, telling jokes, whatever helps, use it. Depression can be all-consuming and it's often devastating, but I'm living proof that it's not always the case. A message that I hope was worth sharing, it certainly was for me.

*The End*