

By Anthony Ackroyd

Sooner or Later.

The first thought I had as I hovered over my own dead body was that I wish I'd died in a different position. Most of my body was lying on the road but my head was plonked on the curb of the pavement like it was resting on a concrete pillow.

This was giving me the double chin look that I have done my best to avoid for the last five years or so when looking in the mirror. By tilting my head slightly upwards I could manufacture a reflection more aligned with my deluded, one chinned self image. If you can't fool yourself who can you fool? Anyway, it looks like the time for fooling myself may be well and truly over.

I came back to my body for a few seconds when I felt something wet and raspy in my ear. The tongue belonged to a kelpie cross, part labrador judging by the un-kelpie like thickness around the midriff.

“Shandy...Oh Jesus!”

Now I'm back looking down on me again. The dog is yappin' up a storm as he looks up at what ever I've now become. Somehow he can see me but his owner is looking at the guy with his head on the curb. She's crying.

“Jesus....shit...Jesus. What do we do Shandy? Jesus!”

She must be talking to the dog because my name ain't Shandy and it certainly isn't Jesus either, though I'm half expecting him to make an appearance soon given my current circumstances. In which case I'd better start thinking more holy thoughts. For the last couple of minutes I've been taking advantage of my new aerial perspective by peeking down the blouse of Shandy's mistress as she stoops over my corpse.

I don't know if that bit of information will make you think less of me but if we're going to share this experience we may as well be honest with each other...and I guess it's true – old habits die hard.

“What do we do Shandy! Jesus!”

She's stroking my face, gently. I wish I could feel the warmth of her hand on my flesh but I'm not inside it anymore. I wish I could smell her beautiful hair but my nose has packed it in. But I can feel her feelings - feel them like they're my own. Why does she care about me? I'm a dead stranger with a dead double chin.

“God! What happened?” A guy in a pale blue business suit. He's overweight and out of breath from running across the street.

“Are you alright?” he asks Shandy's Mum. I know he places his hand on her shoulder out of caring but I feel a jolt of jealousy. I liked the intimacy of her undivided

compassion. Deceased male seeks soft hearted, weeping woman with superb cleavage.

“It’s okay. It’s okay” says the suit sliding his hand around her back to her opposite shoulder. It’s an awkward gesture but genuine and she inhales his comfort and late afternoon body odour with gratitude.

Hey pal I saw her first. Besides everything is far from okay from where I’m standing which by the way is unsupported six feet above you.

“What happened? Do you know?”

“No. I came around the corner and he was just...”

Which is when I remember the taxi.

“We here mate. We here!” The cab driver had been vein-poppingly impatient even by cab driver standards. I was absorbed in the Sydney Morning Herald front page – “Pricey organic chicken not as pure as you think”. The last words I would ever read.

“Mate. We here! Quick. No time!”

I then deliberately took my time as if to make the point that my life had significance beyond this cab ride and that he should be aware of this fact and not assault me with this unwelcome urgency.

I even waited for the ten cents change out of the twenty bucks I gave him. He trawled through a woven money

bag with practised exasperation. I was equal to the task and waited him out until finally he slapped the silver coin into my hand.

I'm half out of the car when he flattens it.

What was occupying my mind just before he hit the juice and my head hit the curb was the following: cab drivers should put those beaded seat covers on all the seats not just their own then maybe passengers would feel more-

Then a whirling sensation, beyond whirling. Like I'd been placed in a spin dryer and Captain Kirk had just yelled "Light speed, Mr. Scott." "I canna do it Captain. He's breaking up!" "Just do it Scotty!" Now I was boldly going where every man, woman, and kelpie cross must go. Eventually.

The suit's on his mobile now. Shouldn't someone be trying some CPR? Shouldn't –

Whoa, something's happening. Stay with me. I'm in the cab again, this time without a body. The cabbie is freaking out. Two voices in his head. One whispers "go back", the other screams "drive until tomorrow".

"Bloody idiot take too much time" he says aloud. Bloody idiot? A little respect for the dead wouldn't go astray.

Through the roof of the taxi. This is random. I'm in the tiny room in the bookstore where the psychic – (as seen on TV) – told me just last week that I'd live to a happy 93. One word for you bitch – refund!

Jump cut to the Paddo markets, looking at second hand books with Elizabeth. It's an overcast day in November but we're so in love that everything we say lands sunny-side-up.

"I'm going to write a bestseller you know."

"Oh, really."

"It's about a Mexican boxer. It's called The Power Of Juan."

She laughed before I even finished the sentence. Clearly a triumph of love over pun.

Thinking about this makes me feel softer. Like a warm ice-cube melting at the edges. I want to tell Liz I love her laughter. I want to tell her that I don't mind that another man now hears that laughter over toast and tea in bed. I really don't know where this sudden rush of posthumous magnanimity is coming from I can only tell you it feels good. The same good I felt the day Liz and I spent the day building a new wall for the chapel in King's Cross. Me, Liz, and people I'd normally cross the street to avoid.

"He just opened his eyes for a sec." The suit's a nice guy but I don't want him to get too excited. My name isn't Lazarus either. My suited friend was right the first time –it's okay, it's totally okay. Death is perfectly safe.

I'm watching the skin and bone cocoon I used to call myself being stretchered into an ambulance. I don't know whether to go with it or stay with my new friends who cared that my body was dead. The man in the pale suit who wants to stop being a financial planner and learn the saxophone, the woman with the beautiful hair who feeds her kelpie cross by hand alone every evening; Shandy who wants nothing but what he wants in this moment and has no concern for the next. If my friends become a couple they'll have a great response to "so how did you two meet?" Huh, over my dead body.

Shit, you're not going to believe this. Bloody hell, it's true! A tunnel of light, more golden than white, actually. It won't surprise you to learn that double chin anxiety, the credibility of organic poultry, and the potential impact of beaded taxi seats on customer satisfaction all seem largely irrelevant at this point.

I'm almost gone. I want to leave you with something helpful. Like the cabbie said "Quick. No time!" Well, here's the first thing that pops into my non-existent head: Buried treasure can never find itself. Sorry it's a bit cryptic but I hope it makes sense, sooner or later.