

Praise for *The Next Big Thing*

‘WOW. This book will become an Aussie classic, alongside *The Castle*, Vegemite 1e and Steve Irwin. Run, don’t walk to the bookstore. I laughed, I got teary and I cheered for the underdogs in this heartwarming story of overcoming adversity, following your dreams and fighting for what matters to you. Everything is big in *The Next Big Thing* – the humour, the heart and the smile you’ll have when you finish reading.’ **Rachael Johns**

‘James Colley’s sparkling wit brings to life this delightful rom-com, revealing that at the heart of Australia’s absurd obsession with towering prawns, oversized bananas and all things “big” is a passion for a larger-than-life love story. In the quirkiest corner of Australian culture, Colley’s charm and warmth spin a tale where “big” laughs lead to “big” love.’ **Nakkiah Lui**

‘*The Next Big Thing* is absurd and moving, ridiculous and sublime. Its ludicrous plot is grounded in the genuine sweetness of a slow-blooming friends-to-lovers romance, as Norm and Ella weigh up the value of a grand gesture, a Big Thing, against a thousand tiny declarations. *The Next Big Thing* is studded with puns and sparkling dialogue like the night sky over the middle of nowhere. It’s soaringly silly and it’ll steal your heart.’ **Clare Fletcher**

‘James Colley is one of the funniest TV writers in Australia. Frankly I’m surprised he had the attention span for a whole book, but by God he’s done it!’ **Annabel Crabb**

'*The Next Big Thing* is simply adorable. In it, James Colley gently captures the messy, ridiculous, melancholic yet joyful heart of small-town Australia and in doing so pays a well-deserved tribute to one of The Greats. This is a novel with the perfect amount of nostalgia and full of characters you can't help but love.' **Jan Fran**

'Poignant and delightful, *The Next Big Thing* crackles with warmth and wry, gentle humour. A gem.' **First Dog on the Moon**

'The only thing more annoying than seeing James Colley excel at comedy writing is seeing him nail a romantic comedy with so much heart and wit. We get it, James. You can do anything.' **Susie Youssef**

'*The Next Big Thing* is the rarest of things: an Australian novel that leaves you damn happy. Equal parts rom-com and small-town underdog adventure, this is your favourite Australian sitcom in book-form. It's going to make you bark laughing, leave you grinning ear-to-ear ... and might just make you cry too.' **Benjamin Law**

'*The Next Big Thing* combines the joys of a classic love story with a distinctly Australian sense of humour. Filled with affection for reckless, youthful hope and genuinely funny, Colley has written something truly delightful.' **Brydie Lee-Kennedy**

'A completely charming book whose characters leap off the page (and straight into your heart ... via a rickety wheelbarrow).'

Virginia Gay

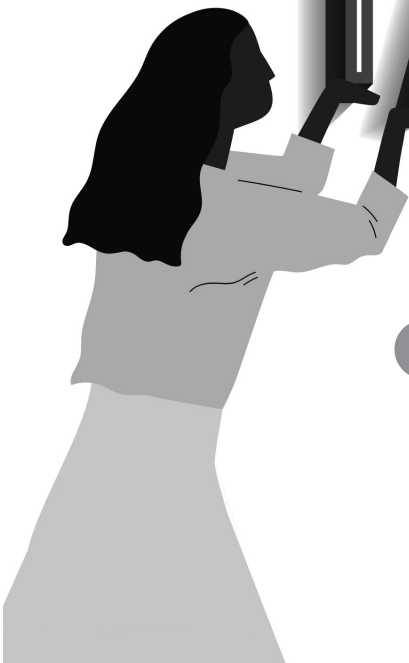
THE NEXT BIG

THING

JAMES
COLLEY



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Prologue

The old dog's deep black eyes flicker with an emotion somewhere between fear and resignation. The garden trolley was out of control. Familiar scents fill his nostrils. Indistinct images bordering on beauty. If this was his last ride, he was going to enjoy it.

The dog is called Puppy, a name he's long since outgrown but one that was never replaced. Pup the Old Dog, they say now. The name rings true. Every day he aches. He holds on only out of love for the young man who, moments ago, carelessly allowed the rusted handle of the garden trolley to slip from his sweaty hand.

Locals watch through shop windows and from wrought-iron seats that threaten to fuse with any exposed flesh. No one moves. Whether it is due to shock, indecision or the macabre desire to see what happens, they are locked fast with only their eyes moving, as though they're trapped inside a portrait hanging over the fireplace in a haunted house.

The wheels of the trolley bounce over the unsealed road that the Norman Council swears they're going to get around to tarring soon. If the old dog had wanted to jump, the option has long since abandoned him. All he can do is look over the rim of the trolley and wonder whether the suddenly wobbling front right wheel will send him crashing into the steel shed with the weathered mural of the young girl dancing on the riverbank, which means certain death, or if it will stay true and he'll be launched through the trees and into the dry riverbed where he'll crash into the rusted chassis of the overturned troopy, and in that way face death. He has no preference.

Overlooking Botany Street, with its runaway trolleys and nihilistic dogs, are two icons of the town of Norman: the Stumbling Elephant Hotel and, behind it, the impressive visage of Vodafone Hill, towering over the dust bowl like *The great wave off Kanagawa*, frozen in time, threatening at any moment to break and crash over the small town.

Halfway up that hill stands another local icon – Norm from Norman, best friend to Pup the Old Dog. He had been pulling the trolley that had brought the old dog into town, when an unfamiliar desire compelled him to climb the hill. He followed the siren's call. He is yet to realise that the handle is no longer in his hand. His mind has wandered off.

Norm has just had a big idea. The biggest idea of his life, in fact. Norm is not used to having ideas, particularly not big ones. The sensation is so strange to him that, for a moment, he wondered if he was experiencing a medical episode. It was

as if he had coaxed a butterfly into his hand and now stood frozen, worried that any sudden movement might scare it away.

Norm is allowing himself to dream, and it requires every last drop of his concentration.

Norm is dreaming of a Big Thing.

‘I might be a genius,’ he says to the old dog who is at this moment bounding past Lucky Duck Pizza and still picking up speed. Norm smiles, an expression so rare that his facial muscles struggle with the burden. It’s as if he learned how to smile by reading about it on Wikipedia. His oversized polo hangs off his thin frame, giving him the look of a scarecrow. He brushes aside his wheat-blond fringe and basks in the sunshine. In the future, Norm from Norman will mark this as the third-best moment of his life.

The rumble of a garden trolley reawakens Norm Perkins. He starts to panic. That’s all there is to do. His legs are too slow to catch the poor dog. His only option is to bear witness.

But there’s one last lifeline for Pup the Old Dog: the dependable incompetence of the Norman Council. The previous summer, Mayor Billy Fitz had sworn on his mother’s grave that he had fixed the pothole out the front of the Sunshine Deli. One week later, he sprained his ankle in that exact hole and had to be tended to by his very-much-alive mother. The pothole remained as deep as ever. The mayor claimed he was much too focused on his recovery to do anything about it.

As if gravitationally pulled, the wobbly wheel of the garden trolley falls into that pothole and snaps off. With a horrible

JAMES COLLEY

piercing screech, the metal frame of the trolley scrapes along the main street, where it slowly grinds to a halt.

Norm races to the site of the crash, takes the old dog in his arms, and tries with all his might to not think about what he almost lost, having already lost so much.

PART ONE

**Nothing's Normal
in Norman**

1.

The testicles of Goulburn's now legendary Big Merino hang down so far that they penetrate the roof of the souvenir shop.

The Canberra Times, 19 August 1991

The single pedestal fan inside the Stumbling Elephant Hotel rotated slowly, bestowing its blessing on the patrons. Plates barely contained the Sunday roast, a tradition from another climate, as sacred as church. The meat was doused in gravy because at the Stumbling Elephant all sorrows were drowned. There were a dozen patrons spread out over as many tables, yet no one made a sound. No scraping of cutlery, no idle chatter. Some paused mid-bite, so as to not inhibit the sound of the small, crackling radio on the bar.

Jasper's *Sunday Afternoon Jamboree* on 1228 AM Radio Norman was not typically appointment listening, but this was not a typical jamboree. Indeed, it pushed the very boundaries of what could honestly be classed as a jamboree. Gone was

Jasper's usual breathy lilt, his attempt to sound like the hosts on Radio National. Instead his tone was sombre and defeated. According to Jasper, by way of the mayor's office, they had just received official word that, come the end of the month, Delight, a small town about 35 kilometres south-south-east of Norman, would cease to exist.

That announcement in and of itself was not enough to shock the patrons of the Stumbling Elephant, who seemed rather unmoved. They had become used to towns defaulting all around them. According to the government these homesteads were no longer 'viable'. It was selfish to continue living there, considering all the other factors concerning the nation at this time.

Sandy, the publican, kept a map behind the bar of the local area with black crosses marking each lost town. With a movement so routine it lacked any of the appropriate drama, she took her marker and drew a cross over Delight. This was the third cross over a town closer to the city than Norman.

Jasper's weedy voice stammered as he continued to read. 'This means supply runs to Norman will again be reduced—'

A loud groan cut off the rest of the announcement. The bar came alive with cutlery clattering and annoyed chattering. A slow depression seeped up through the floors of the bar as the reality of its patrons' predicament dawned on them. There was no more energy to expend in frustration. Nothing to be done about it, after all. Just another indignity the town must face as it circled the drain.

Norm entered the Stumbling Elephant and looked for Ella,

as he did everywhere. He didn't often visit the pub, but the interior was unchanging enough to feel familiar. The same pool table rigged to play without a gold coin, the same old wooden decor with the same sad old townsfolk staring into their drinks, all alone together.

Norm considered climbing Vodafone Hill to text Ella but decided against it. The ordeal of carting the now broken garden trolley weighed down by the dog all the way along the riverbed and back home had sapped his energy reserves dry. Gingerly, he settled into the only seat at the bar that retained most of its cushioning. He had not come in to celebrate. The revelation of the morning had given way to the bitter taste of his least favourite day of the year. It was right that he was here alone. This was the home of misery.

He knew everyone in the bar by name. If pushed, he could quote their home address, mother's maiden name, and just about every other detail he would need to steal their identity.

'Thought I'd be seeing you today,' Sandy said from behind the bar as she poured Norm a dark ale and sat it on top of a coaster that read 'You'll never forget a night at the Elephant'. Her voice was soft and caring, a surprise to anyone who judged her by the biceps that bulged as she poured from the tap or threw you through the front door.

He might have wondered how Sandy remembered but it was obvious enough. Any other day, Norm would only set foot in the Elephant with his head down, headed straight for the town's only ATM. He took his money and he left. He didn't even wait for his receipt. Sandy knew this well, as she checked every one. It was her way of keeping an eye on his

dwindling pile of funds. This was the only day of the year that Norm took a seat at the Stumbling Elephant. One drink, a tribute.

She gave him space to wallow for a moment and he was grateful for it. He'd barely cracked nine when he was left alone. It was nearly thirteen years ago now. How was it already thirteen years? How was it only thirteen? He wondered what had possessed his father to name him after this town. And, if his father could see them now, which one would he find more disappointing?

The plight of Norman was the same tale that had played out across the wheat belt. Those who could leave had gone a long time ago. The rest had resigned themselves to going down with the ship. It was Norm's experience in life that awful things happened suddenly. Life changed in an instant and then it was up to you to hold on and ride the aftershocks. But this was different. It was a car crash at painfully low speeds, with no one willing to grab the wheel or so much as tap the brakes.

Norm took another sip and winced involuntarily. It was impossible to separate the town from the memories of his father. One was lost in a moment, the other he was losing slowly. Every memory he had was forged on those streets. If the town was lost, they would be, too.

Through the window of the bar he could see Vodafone Hill, the exact spot where he'd stood earlier that day, lost in a dream. Norm was comfortable in the world of dreams. Growing up, he was called a space cadet. He thought that meant he'd work for NASA one day.

Still, this one idea stuck in his teeth. He wondered if the two sips of dark ale had gone to his head. His left leg began to bounce restlessly against the metal footrest on his stool while he tore at the coaster in his hand. The idea filled his lungs like water. He had to release it or else it would consume him.

Norm had never really felt the pull of destiny, at least not in a positive way. Yet, at this moment, it was as if he was being called to a higher purpose.

It was the town that spoke first. Specifically, it was Rocko, no known last name (unless that was his last name). No one knew for sure but there had never been two Rockos in the Stumbling Elephant at the same time, so differentiation had never been an issue. His smell reached Norm long before his words, intoxicating and thick, a mix of Melbourne Bitter and rollies, strong enough to kill a cat.

‘You’re in my seat,’ Rocko snarled.

‘I think you’ll find they’re all my seats, Rocko,’ Sandy interjected, sliding over the moment her spider-sense tingled.

‘This one’s got my name on it,’ Rocko replied, pointing to a crude carving on the underside of the bar where ROCKO had been scratched out with a key.

Sandy smiled. ‘You swore to me you didn’t write that. You said it was some teenagers and I asked why would teens scrawl ROCKO on the bar and you said, and I quote, “Who can understand kids these days”.’

Rocko demurred, mumbling something about how the teens probably knew that this was his seat. Norm didn’t want to get distracted and wanted to cause trouble even less, so he jumped out of the seat and offered it to Rocko with a flash

of a smile. In return, Rocko generously gifted Norm a hit from his shoulder as he pushed past and sank into a well-worn groove in the padding.

Sandy gave Norm a sympathetic smile but the boy couldn't have cared less about losing his seat. His eyes had shifted to the corner of the bar. The radio announcement had provided a merciful early end to the Sunday session acoustic set, which was a fancy way of referring to Harvey Claystone playing an ill-advised and off-tune cover of Dragon's 'Are You Old Enough?' on a guitar missing its D-string. Through the stained windows he could see Harvey's silhouette rolling himself another cigarette. The microphone remained in its stand on the abandoned stage.

Looking out at the crowd, Norm wondered if he had happily walked himself onto the gallows and popped his head in a noose. He grasped the microphone stand in his clammy hands and adjusted it to a height more suitable for his gangly frame. He went to speak and the stand crashed back down to belly-button height. The crash reverberated through the speakers and for the first time the patrons seemed to notice he existed.

Rather than risk another fumble Norm chose to lean awkwardly down to the microphone, somewhat in the shape of a gazelle drinking from the watering hole unaware that it's about to be swallowed whole by a crocodile. Whatever courage he had felt stepping onto the stage had quickly manifested itself into the early signs of a panic attack. His heart was beating so hard he wondered if it could be seen through his chest like he was a cartoon character. The crowd could smell fear. It energised them. At last, there was something to see in Norman.

‘Go on then, whistle,’ said Big Gavin Walsh, to the laughs of his friends.

‘Do you take requests? Piss off!’ added regular-sized Eka Ismail, to no response. He sank back in his chair, annoyed.

The blinding stage lights limited Norm’s view to the first three rows of tables, meaning each voice ripped out of the darkness and felt even more threatening. All in all, Norm would have much rather been driving with the top down on a lovely day in Dallas.

‘Is this the quiz?’ asked another voice from the void. To Norm, this one seemed kinder, if undeniably thicker.

‘Yes is it, Stephen!’ called Sandy from behind the bar, as she passed Rocko another can of Melbourne Bitter. ‘Question one, what night is the quiz?’

‘It’s Tuesdays!’ said Thick Stephen with delight.

‘Correct you are,’ Sandy called. ‘Question two, what day is it today?’

‘Uh, it’s Sunday!’ said Thick Stephen, absolutely chuffed with himself. He’d never gone two from two in the quiz before and rated himself a real chance at picking up the meat tray.

Sandy turned to Norm and, with the same sweet but firm voice she used on the drunks, told him to either piss or get off the pot.

That was enough to spur some life into Norm. He cleared his throat and spoke in a voice a full octave higher than he’d ever reached before.

‘Norman – ahem – Norman is dying.’ He paused for what he thought was dramatic effect. ‘Nothing grows. Nothing lives. No one stops by anymore.’

‘Yeah, that’s why we’re trying to have a drink,’ called Rocko from his stool at the bar, flinging the can of Melbourne Bitter directly at Norm. Lucky for Norm, a lifetime of being bullied had him in a constant state of alarm and as the can appeared through the lights, he managed to deftly duck and let it sail past his right shoulder. The quick reflexes gained him a little bit of respect from the crowd, all except Rocko, of course.

‘You owe me a beer,’ he called.

‘Rocko, behave yourself,’ Sandy chided.

‘He’s being a sooky-la-la,’ Rocko replied, a dirty hand thrust out towards Norm.

This was one of the most devastating accusations that any Australian could face. The crowd grumbled in agreement. Norm was losing them fast.

‘I’m not a sooky-la-la,’ he mumbled. It was too late, the crowd was emboldened now.

‘He’s having a sook!’

‘Since when has this been the Sunday Sook Session?’

‘But ... but ... but it is not too late to save the town,’ Norm pushed on.

Whatever enthusiasm he had expected was not forthcoming. All Norm received were a few rolled eyes and the scraping sounds of patrons returning to their Sunday roasts.

‘Did you hear me? We can save the town! Yay!’ Receiving no response, Norm dropped his arms to his side in frustration. ‘What, you’re just going to sit there, chewing on your dinner and letting Norman die?’

‘It’s already dead, mate,’ Gavin said, his mouth half-full of lamb, bits of gravy spraying across the table. ‘No use sooking about it.’

Norm’s eyes lowered, his posture softened. He received a small, sympathetic smile from Betsy Langham, the local florist, at the table in front of him. Kindness radiated from Mrs Langham. Norm could sense that she was about to speak, maybe offer a desperately needed word or two of support, but before she could, her husband Sidney leaned forward, looking at Norm over his half-moon glasses as if the boy were a bug.

‘Young man, you simply do not understand the situation of which you speak.’ He spoke with the vocal flourish of a Shakespearean actor. Here was a man who truly enjoyed the sound of his own voice. Despite the heat, he was dressed in trousers and a collared shirt, his jowls having descended over time to lock his face in a permanent frown that reminded Norm of an old mastiff. ‘Right at this moment, you are standing at a wake telling us that there is still hope for the patient!’

He projected these final words with a flourish, as if expecting the crowd to cheer him on. No cheer came.

‘He’s a sooky-la-la!’ Rocko cried. Now came the applause. Mr Langham scoffed and returned to his meal. Norm looked to Sandy for a life raft.

‘You are coming off as a bit of a sooky-la-la, love,’ Sandy confirmed. ‘Just tell us your little idea and then we can all sit here in miserable peace.’

The crowd applauded again.

‘To the rest of you,’ Sandy said, commanding the room in a way Norm never could, ‘if you can sit through five minutes of Harvey’s awful racket, you can give this kid the same courtesy. Sorry Harvey.’

Harvey, having just returned from his cigarette break to find his stage taken and his talent insulted, skulked in the corner, glaring at the usurper.

Norm pushed back his fringe and took a deep breath, aware that it may be his last.

‘My plan is uh, radical to say the least but I have thought very hard about it and I ... and I think that radical might just be the way to go. Even if it isn’t, heck, isn’t it better to at least go out swinging than just sit and wait for death?’

Norm laughed nervously. The stony faces of the crowd didn’t budge. He took a sip from the dark ale in his hand, choking it back. Still disgusting but enough to clear his windpipe.

He thought again about his father. Norm imagined him sitting in the crowd, proudly watching his son try to save the town. He lost himself in the bright stage lights, as if looking into heaven itself. Time seemed to hold still. Somehow, amid all the chaos, a perfect calmness engulfed Norm. He exhaled deeply, puffed out his concave chest and spoke.

‘I think we should build a—’

At that very moment, Norm became suddenly entranced by the outline of something in the light. His mouth opened in wonder. By the time he saw the red label of the Melbourne Bitter can it was too late to duck.

Awful things happen suddenly.

THE NEXT BIG THING

It hit with a satisfying crunch, spraying Harvey's portable amp in foamy beer. Norm's knees buckled. Electricity crackled. Harvey screamed.

'Phwoar, d'you see that!?' Rocko shouted, jumping from his stool, arms up in triumph.

Thick Stephen sighed deeply, having just realised he wasn't going to win a meat tray. The stage lights flickered. A fire erupted from the back of the amp. And Norm's whole world went dark.

2.

Once upon a time, the town of Norman was bisected by a river. Legend has it that the shopkeepers could hop from one side to the other holding a pallet of fresh fruit without worrying about getting their feet wet. Once you passed Langham & Sons Ironmongers, the river would curl and widen as it made its way out of town.

Now that the river had run dry, the fastest way into town was right down its centre taking a left at the rusted-over chassis of the upturned troopy, making sure to slap the number plate for good luck, and straight on until you hit the old painted shed that had nearly ended Pup the Old Dog.

Norm would have rather never shown his face on Botany Street again. The rejection of the night before still stung. The red welt on his forehead stung even harder. His stomach, usually tight with anxiety whenever he was in public, now boiled with anger. He was trying to save these people but they'd rather wallow in misery. He decided, all things considered, to be a petulant child about the whole situation.

Dragging his feet, kicking stones, doing everything he could to indicate that he really didn't want to be in town, as if he had a say in the matter.

Norm had woken up that morning on a mattress on the floor of the Batchens' living room. He was in a world of pain. Ella Batchen had been tapping away on her laptop, acting as if there was nothing more fascinating in her life than organising spreadsheets for her father's concreting business.

Norm had pushed back the blankets and noticed he wasn't wearing the same clothes as the night before. Instead, he was dressed in an oversized t-shirt and shorts both bearing the logo of Norman Concreting. The tagline read, 'Where else are you gonna go?' A little cocky, admittedly, but Ella's dad, Mick Batchen, was the only concreter within an hour in any direction so he could afford to be cocky.

'You didn't change me into this, did you?' Norm asked.

Ella closed the laptop and scrunched up her face as if he'd just offered her a bite of a worm. 'Ew. No. Dad carried you home from the pub and hosed you down in the front yard. He said you smelled rank, too. How much did you have?'

This gave birth to a new feeling in the pit of Norm's stomach. Still shame but a different twinge of shame. How nice, he thought, to get to experience all of them at once. Like ordering a beer paddle of humiliation.

'He told you what happened, then,' Norm said, unable to look Ella in the eye.

'Nah, he said I'd have more fun finding that out myself.'

Ella, like her Nanna Doris, simply refused to listen to good gossip without a hot drink to sip on, so that had meant

walking up the river to Norman's one and only cafe. The Sunshine Deli was in no sense a deli. It was just a word that sweet old Mr Baylis believed meant 'fancy eatery' and so he went with it. He had a lot of beliefs. His coffee philosophy was one of quantity over quality. The stein he placed in front of customers could attest to that. He called it a latte but what that really meant was that he shook up the Nescafe Blend 43 before serving it. Its colour was about the same as you'd see trickling down the river when it rained (if it ever rained again).

Although Mr Baylis was rarely seen without a broad smile peeking out from under his overgrown moustache, Norm saw the man frown as he emerged from the dead trees at the river's edge, sweating as he pushed Pup the Old Dog, now seated in an old wheelbarrow. With a helpful, albeit a little too forceful, shove from Ella, he was over the lip and cruising. Norm knew word would have gotten around already that he'd humiliated himself the night before. He used to be a harmless oddity. Now, they might well have him committed.

Mr Baylis was an incredibly humble man. His was perhaps the only cafe in country Australia that didn't claim to have the world's greatest vanilla slice. Instead, the hand-painted sign on the glass read 'World's 3rd Greatest Vanilla Slice'. He'd once admitted to Ella that he'd tried a vanilla slice on his honeymoon in Northern Italy that he couldn't in good conscience claim to have beaten. Third felt safe. No one checks who came third.

With great care, Norm slowly manoeuvred the wheelbarrow into the patch of shade cast by the shadow of

the old Sunshine Deli sign. Sneaking to an adjacent table, he emptied a pile of napkins out of a small purple clay tray then took the water from the table and poured out just enough to reach the lip of the tray. Delicately he placed it in front of Pup.

With the dog settled, Ella and Norm placed their usual order and sat at their usual table. Moments later they were presented with their steins of coffee. Ella sipped and retched slightly, then added a spoonful of brown sugar from the small, misshapen pot that Mrs Baylis had made herself.

Norm shifted in his seat, trying to hit an angle that blocked the punishing light from roasting him as well. There was another small patch of shade, offered by the rooster-shaped weathervane atop the long since abandoned Maffezzoni Metals warehouse.

The scent of burning scones wafted through the air. Mr Baylis' sense of smell wasn't what it used to be. Nothing about him was what it used to be. At this moment, he was shuffling inside, shaking arms filled with plates from another table. 'Table two needs milk, Mrs. Don't forget to pop the kettle on for the tea,' he said. There was no one inside.

Ella stirred her coffee, leaned in and then recoiled suddenly as her elbow singed on the table frame. 'This had better be worth it,' she said, gritting her teeth as she tried to rub the pain away. 'Spill!'

Norm started to feel shy. It had been a bad idea, a bad mistake, a very bad day. That was the problem – the day. He had been caught up in the emotion of the day. He'd been enchanted by a silly idea as a way of escaping it all and then

in a terrible moment the reality of the world came crashing down on him. Awful things happen suddenly. He didn't know how to explain all of that to Ella. The thought made his mouth turn dry. He felt that same pulsing fear that he had felt on the stage in the *Stumbling Elephant*, as if he only had a few seconds to say something or Ella would brain him with a can of Melbourne Bitter, or lacking that, her gigantic cup of watery coffee.

He realised he hadn't been looking at her for some time now. He'd been silently staring at his hands, fidgeting in his lap. He assumed when he finally met her gaze she'd be annoyed by him, as sick of him as everyone else, but that wasn't true. She was patiently waiting. There was no move to hurry him, no boredom creeping into her brow. She could be rough with him, but she was always kind. He couldn't help but feel a little guilty at that, though. Ella spent her life waiting for Norm.

'I ... I don't ...' he struggled.

Ella tilted her head. 'What's with the wheelbarrow?'

'Oh that,' he laughed. And he was off. He told Ella all about the bouncing garden trolley, the long journey dragging it back home and the guilt-ridden triple serving of dog food and ice cream he'd given Pup on return.

'Ice cream isn't good for dogs,' Ella informed him.

'Let him indulge,' Norm said with a wave of his hand, as if the problem was the old dog's summer figure not his digestive tract.

'So,' Ella began in the soft yet direct tone of a hostage negotiator. 'How did you end up on my couch?'

Norm recounted the events of the night before as best he could, save for a couple of details that were lost when the Melbourne Bitter can indented itself in his skull.

Ella was stunned. 'How do you not call me?'

'I didn't know I was going to do it,' Norm said. 'I went there because it was—'

Norm stammered and Ella remembered there were only one day each year that he would willingly set foot in the Stumbling Elephant.

'Oh, Norm,' she said, reaching out for his hand resting on the table, her voice thick with the pain of realising her mistake.

He shook his head. 'It's fine. It's a silly tradition. Part of me is glad he didn't witness it, really.'

Norm let out a small laugh but Ella didn't.

'I should have been there for you.'

Norm could tell she was looking at him with those wide brown eyes, but he couldn't meet her gaze. He stared down at his hands in his lap, where he was tearing a napkin into small pieces.

'Death sucks,' Ella said.

'Death sucks,' Norm nodded.

'It should be illegal.'

'I think it is. Causing it at least. It's hard to punish the victims.'

'But it's wild, isn't it? Like, mortality is wild. We're all going to die and it hardly ever comes up. It should lead off the news every night.'

Norm laughed. 'Okay, so how do you see this working? Every night – *every night* – they play the news theme

and the anchor starts by saying, “Good evening, you and everyone you know is going to die. Now here’s Janine with the weather.”

‘I don’t reckon you’d go straight to the weather.’

‘You’d better hurry, Janine’s gonna die.’

‘Never liked Janine anyways.’

All of a sudden they were both cackling, and Norm could feel a warmth cascading through his entire body. He met Ella’s eyes and could have sworn he saw them sparkle.

‘Come on then, what happened, Cadbury? Had a glass and a half of beer and triggered a complete psychological meltdown?’

‘Kinda, yeah. I was thinking about Dad and how much he loved this town and how he always said it had saved him and I wondered what he would do to save it. You know him, he wanted everything to be big and bold so I had a big and bold idea. I thought the town would love it. But they were all mean to me and made me feel bad and they wouldn’t even listen.’

Ella scoffed. ‘You are such a sooky la-la.’

Norm was aghast. ‘I am not a sooky la-la. Would people *please* stop calling me a sooky la-la?’

‘Or what, you’ll have a sook about it?’

‘No,’ Norm mumbled, aware that he was sooking at this very moment.

‘So, what inspired all of this? Were you drunk?’

‘I only had like two sips of beer.’

Ella whistled. ‘Bloody hell, you were white girl wasted.’

The air hung still for a beat. Pup the Old Dog snapped at a fly.

‘So?’ Ella asked, her eyebrows raised.

Norm leaned in, confused. ‘So?’

‘What’s the idea!?’

‘Oh.’ Norm exhaled deeply and shook his head. ‘Forget about it. It was a silly idea. The emotion of the day, you know? Doesn’t matter, anyway.’

He reached out to grab another napkin from the table, but Ella caught his wrist.

‘Norm,’ she smiled sweetly, without loosening her grip. ‘If you don’t tell me, I am going to kill you.’

She threw his arm back.

‘When you put it like that,’ Norm smiled, rubbing his wrist. He braced himself for yet more humiliation. ‘A big thing.’

Ella snorted.

‘Not like that,’ Norm said. ‘Get your mind out of the gutter.’

‘What? You said you want a big thing and a person isn’t supposed to think of—’

‘I don’t mean a big ... that ... I mean a Big Thing. One of the Big Things. I don’t think there is a grouping term for them. No one ever really thought about it before now, I guess. They’re the Big Things, you know, like the wonders of the world but off a highway in Humpty Doo or whatever. A Big Thing!’

Norm performed a useless gesture of raising his hand above his head to indicate something was very tall and Ella finally managed to catch his meaning. She paused for what felt like an age to Norm.

He tried to read her expression, usually so open to him. She gave away nothing. Her lips pursed as if she were a sommelier, tasting the idea for the first time. Her brown eyes looked through him. At what, he couldn't tell. He looked away, scared to be caught staring. He focused on the table, on his hands, on anything else other than the delicate face he knew so well.

'I think we should do it,' Ella said.

'What?'

'Let's do it. You and me. Let's save the town.'

Norm's eyes lit up. The bleak mood that had engulfed him all morning seemed to slide off his shoulders and onto the ground. They shared a smile. It was a perfect moment that couldn't even be dampened by the profane curses of Mr Baylis pulling charcoal husks from his oven.

3.

The Big Pavlova is the work of Goulburn businessman Mr Peter Jackson-Calway who has developed an industrial site in Marulan for his pavlova, cheesecake and chocolate factory ...

'And nearly everybody thinks it's great,' Mr Jackson-Calway said.

The Canberra Times, 18 September 1984

Mick Batchen was out of his depth, but there was nothing unusual about that. He had spent most of his life with his head completely underwater, only treating himself to a gasp of air when his schedule would allow it.

He was badly outnumbered already with three kids and only his mother-in-law, Doris, providing support. Widow-in-law? Was there a word for whatever their relationship was now?

It was a handful to say the very least. But still, when his only daughter returned from primary school with poor Tony's kid expecting a feed, Mick just smiled and pulled up a chair. After all, what was a little more chaos?

At least Ella had someone. Mick knew how to talk to the boys, or not talk to the boys. He could line them up in front of the wheelie bin with a bat in hand and bowl half-trackers. He was still learning how to be a single father, but he'd been talking cricket all of his life. There was always a lesson to be learned about reading your conditions, the benefits of patience, and how you can do absolutely everything right and still end up on the long, lonely walk back to the pavilion.

But how was he supposed to talk to Ella?

He was already out of ideas. In a few years she would be a teenager. It was scary to even begin to comprehend. They needed a quiet moment, but when had this lot ever been quiet?

He'd taken the kids down to the river to try and wear them out, but it was a lost cause. Gary was screaming and splashing about in the knee-high water, trying to bait his Nanna into chasing after him. Zeke was roaming the bank with a nerf gun and was in turn being chased by an overly excited golden lab puppy. A puppy? Where on Earth did they find a puppy? Bloody hell.

Mick was drowning alright. He hung his head down and settled into the camping chair. He thought about the thermos full of instant coffee sitting in the picnic basket but decided it wasn't worth the effort of standing up. He closed his eyes and let the sound of the river, the screaming kids and the excited barks all turn into white noise. His tranquillity was short-lived, as a nerf dart connected with the very top of his head and ricocheted into his lap.

‘Enough!’ he cried with an almighty roar.

And for a moment, peace reigned throughout the land.

They gathered by the river’s edge and distributed the devon sandwiches, bags of chips and cut-up cucumbers and carrots. Usually, Mick was the type to eat in silence, only intervening when the conversation got too loud or was likely to start a fight – so only fifteen or sixteen times a meal. But this felt like a chance to impart some wisdom to the thin and pale young boy who had wandered out of a Dickensian novel onto his picnic blanket.

‘Do you know where the modern world began, Norm?’ he asked.

Norm, all of nine years old, simply did not have a satisfactory answer to that question. He looked at Ella. She rolled her eyes. Mick pretended not to see the attitude as he pushed on.

‘Have you ever heard of Göbekli Tepe?’

Norm shook his head and with a voice more suited to a cartoon mouse explained that he didn’t own any video games and that was why the other kids at school didn’t want to hang out with him. Ella helpfully added that it wasn’t the only reason. Mick decided to let that through to the keeper.

‘It’s a proper dry place. Nothing there, hey? During the day, it feels like you’ve stepped into a fan-forced oven. Pasty fella like you would turn as red as a lobster. Burnt to a crisp, you’d be.’ He held up a bit of crust as he said this to illustrate the point. Norm watched on, completely mesmerised. ‘But at night it was quiet, cold, no signs of life. Only the weary traveller, lost on their way somewhere else. Passing through

with no regard for where they were standing. Until one day – CRASH!

Mick clapped and Norm jumped, spraying a packet of light and tangy into the air.

‘Easy, eff you,’ Nanna Doris cried.

‘A bolt of lightning strikes the rock and suddenly there’s this sizzling crater in the ground.’

Ella and Zeke were both mouthing along but Mick took some satisfaction from seeing that Gary was on the edge of his seat. ‘Who sent the lightning?’ he asked.

Mick hadn’t been expecting that question and it threw him off his rhythm. ‘Uh, I don’t know, son. God.’

‘Is God real?’ Ella asked, crunching on a cucumber.

‘I ... uh ... I don’t know. The point is—’

‘How could God have sent the lightning if you don’t know if he’s real?’ Ella said, clearly enjoying this far too much.

‘Well, he did then,’ said Mick, trying to get back to his point.

‘Why?’

‘He was smiting someone?’

‘What’s mighty mean?’ Gary asked.

‘Not mighty, smiting.’

‘It’s when you’re bad so God hits you with lightning and you go *pfshhh* and explode everywhere,’ Zeke added helpfully.

‘I’m gonna smite you,’ Ella said, elbowing Zeke.

‘I’ll smite you first. I’ll double-smite you.’

‘I’ll might your bum-bum,’ Gary shouted, overflowing with excitement.

‘No one is smiting anyone’s bum-bum,’ Mick said, raising his voice to regain control of the room.

‘Wish someone would smite me,’ Nanna Doris muttered.

‘So anyway, there’s this smoking crater in the ground, right. And when the people—’

‘Which people?’ Ella interjected but Mick wasn’t being thrown off course again.

‘When they came across it ... whoever they were ... they noticed this dust on the inside.’

‘Deadly! Dust!’ Gary added.

‘Proper deadly, Gary. As you might know, Norm, limestone is made of what we call calcite aragonite,’ Mick continued, taking a finger of red dirt from the ground and holding it up like a precious relic.

‘Boring,’ Gary said. Ella cackled and Mick shot her a warning look. She straightened and spoke in an overly proper voice.

‘Come on, Gary, there’s nothing more exciting than calcio-whatsitsface.’

Mick snorted and there was silence. He sat for a moment while everyone remembered who was in charge of this family. All the while, Norm looked on, his big curious eyes wide open and awaiting more.

‘If you take this limestone dust and you heat it, you add sand, you mix it. Do you know what you get?’

‘No!’ Gary answered, his enthusiasm more than making up for his lack of useful information.

‘Concrete,’ Zeke said, the boredom dripping from his voice.

‘Cement,’ his father said.

‘Same thing.’

Mick’s voice burst in rage, pinning Zeke to the ground.

‘They’re not the same thing, Zeke. You know damned well that they’re not the same thing.’ Mick turned with a smile back to Norm. ‘For the first time now, humanity had this magical material. What they had in their hands was going to change the world as we know it forever. They had discovered something that would outlast us all. When everything else crumbles, this will be known as the Concrete Age, like the Bronze and Iron before it.’

‘It was in their hands?’ Ella asked.

‘Metaphorically, Ella,’ her father replied.

‘Okay, because that would be gross and go all hard and then they’d have rock arms.’

‘You see,’ Mick said, desperate to power through his story, ‘when you lay down cement that says to the world that this is your place. Here is where I will stay. This is where you can reach me now. This is home. And if people know where to find you, they know where to trade with you. They come from all over the known world and they bring to you everything they have found. Suddenly, trade, commerce, society, all of these wonderful things are born. And where are they born? On top of cement.’

‘I don’t know, I reckon your great-great-great-grandfather or whatever might take some issue with that,’ Ella interjected. This chastened Mick for a moment, as he realised his error.

‘You know what I mean,’ he said, trying to save face.

‘Did us mob have concrete?’ Gary asked.

‘Cement,’ Mick corrected.

‘We didn’t need it, bub,’ Nanna Doris interjected, giving the little fella a kiss on the cheek. ‘We don’t need no slab of

THE NEXT BIG THING

cement to say, "Here's who I am and where I'm from." That's a load of phooey.'

Ella, Gary and Zeke all burst into laughter. Norm, too, though his eyes darted nervously back to Mick.

'Phooey! Phooey! Phooey!' The mad kids were all chanting, banging their hands together.

'Oh, stuff yas all then,' Mick said, rising up from his camping chair and walking to the car. Wisdom could wait for another time.