

# CHAPTER 1

## THE RUPTURE

### TRACK 1

'Losin' End', The Doobie Brothers,  
*Takin' It to the Streets* (1976)

There are moments in life that deliver a jolt, where time stands still, which make you confront who you are, why you're here, what it is you're doing and whatever the hell it is you're going to do next.

This was one of them, my erect cock resting on the chin of one of the most famous women in Australia. Patricia had been on the cover of *The Australian Women's Weekly*.

'Come in my mouth,' she said.

It had only taken thousands of dollars in psychotherapy, prescription drugs, domestic and international airfares, crates of wine, hundreds of dates, innumerable screws, being tied up, sucked off, trying to make myself feel *alive* any which way I could, but it dawned on me

at that exact moment. I was okay.

I didn't need to align my chakras or go to a meditation retreat in the bush or stand around a campfire sharing my story with other men in crisis or see another goddamn doctor. By doing what this crooked-lipped sylph was asking, I was finally doing what friends and family had wanted me to do all along. I was 'moving on'.

At this very point in time, how could I want anything more? Wasn't this what every man wanted? Lived for? Doing to a beautiful woman what most women, beautiful or otherwise, weren't exactly offering up on a plate for their boyfriends or husbands, let alone a random internet fuck in a \$10 million home by Sydney Harbour on a school night?

Everything that had come before suddenly didn't matter. Straddling Patricia's face, I looked out through the window, past the expensive, thick, red velvet drapes and the immaculate green lawn and elaborate water feature, to the dark cove where white yachts were bobbing in the moonlight.

How did I get here? I closed my eyes, unloaded and, like the Eddie Van Halen keyboard solo in 'Jump' playing out in my head, a new part of my life began: the part where I didn't have to look back with regret anymore.

Perhaps the more relevant question is not how I'd got there but why it had taken so long. I was 37, at my physical peak and reasonably attractive to most women I met in the course of my working day. I was a sports-writer with a bunch of online opinion columns, a couple of them in Australia, another overseas and altogether making enough money to get by without actually doing much work at all.

Years before I'd stumbled by accident on the life I'd always wanted when I'd got drunk in a Hamburg nightclub with a balding, overweight English producer called Will who worked for Fox Sports, a pay-TV channel in Australia. Red cheeked, sweaty and missing his shirt, he'd come down from dancing on a podium, walked up to the bar where I was resting my elbows alongside a shot of vodka, thrown an arm around me and straight up offered me a job.

'Hey, grumpy. I've got a proposition for you,' he said. 'Write me a column about soccer. I'll pay you for an hour's work what you make in a day.'

At the time I was writing for and editing Australia's longest running sports magazine, *Inside Sport*, and the Socceroos, Australia's men's team, had just qualified for Germany 2006, their first appearance at a FIFA World Cup since 1974. This had occasioned the German government, in its infinite wisdom, to pay for me, Will and a bunch of other ingrate journos to go around the

country for ten days – no expense spared – in the hope we’d write positive things.

Naturally, rather than soberly reading plaques at war memorials we spent most of those ten days off our faces in beer halls and pumping discotheques. The writer from *Vogue* even pissed in a dustbin by the elevator doors of a five-star hotel in Düsseldorf. With the money on offer and Will’s level of intoxication factored into the equation (how soon before he changed his mind?), it was a no-brainer. I accepted on the spot. When we’d sobered up and got back home Will made it happen and the column was a hit. I never looked back.

The job set me free. After years of toiling as an underpaid, overworked editor of books and magazines, I was finally unencumbered and relatively unstressed. With a laptop and the wonder of wireless technology, I could write anywhere. The beach. The park. The pool. Any number of café tables. Bars. Airport lounges. Hotel rooms. My bed. Other people’s beds.

‘The web,’ said Will, ‘is where it’s at.’ And he was right. For me it was that and more. It was freedom.

The column didn’t demand much of my time. Typically by mid-morning each day of the week I would arrive at something controversial to say about scumbag FIFA executive committee members or an inept national-team coach or federation official, bang out 500 or 600 furious words designed to piss off the

maximum amount of people, send it off to Will and his team of editors and then forget all about it. The comments and hits rolled in. When I did piles of research or picked topics that were important but not populist, the comments and hits dried up. It suited my employers that I became, in effect, a ‘shock jock’.

After a year at Fox, I switched to SBS, one of Australia’s two public broadcasters and the rights holder of the World Cup, increasing my reach. When Will followed me to SBS soon afterwards, I got offered an additional column with the brief to write about anything I liked. There was talk of me even co-hosting an online show with one of SBS’s female stars.

But career progression didn’t interest me so much at that point in my life. What I was really interested in, to be frank, was my sex life. I had sex with lots of women in all kinds of places and the work allowed me to fuck girls anywhere. It was a double life of sorts but I was hooked.

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A wry but concerned friend once joked that my only weaknesses were ‘pussy and cheesecake’ and to others, including my family, it might well have looked that way. I was overweight. I was sleeping around. In truth, though, I was no boulder and these preoccupations

were only recent. All I really wanted was love. I was searching for it because I'd lost it. Or rather, *her*: Lara, my wife and the mother of our gorgeous, copper-haired, three-year-old daughter, Evie.

A gifted singer who'd turned her back on a major-label contract and potential pop stardom because she didn't like the way she was being packaged by her record company, Lara was enthralling when we first met: five foot six, 25 years old, long dirty-blond hair, coquettish eyes, high cheekbones, a smile wider than Julia Roberts's, and crucially, for they were always talking points, tits as heavy and perfectly formed as Monica Bellucci's. We fucked constantly. While her magnetism and force of personality could start parties when she walked into a room, equally she possessed such lack of self-consciousness as to be able to walk down to the supermarket in her pyjamas and uggs. She was also bright, generous, doting, affectionate and sensitive. All of which, in my eyes, made her an amazing girlfriend and, later, the perfect wife. I loved her and lusted after her with everything I had, and it was a lot.

Yet after ten years of being together, eight married, three as parents, she left me. 'I love you but I'm not in love with you' were her exact words one awful autumn day.

I had never even contemplated hearing them – Lara was my best friend, my soul mate – but they came,

forcefully and with no room for negotiation, as we sat on the end of our bed. Her declaration came two weeks before I was due to release my first book. It even had a dedication to her. It couldn't be removed.

Not quite believing what I'd just heard, I asked her to stay until the launch so I could hold myself together. She agreed.

Standing before a room of hundreds of people, including Lara (who was there to show her 'support'), and trying to muster up the will to smile, make jokes and enjoy the moment, my heart felt like it had been cut in half with a meat cleaver and left to drain, twitching but still beating, on a chopping block. It was like I'd come to celebrate my own death.

I hadn't seen any of it coming. I considered myself to be smart, well read and a good conversationalist. I had interesting friends and exotic social networks. I adored Lara. I'd never cheated on her. I was, I thought, safe from such a calamity. Yet every relationship faces challenges. This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to me.

How had I managed to miss it?

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Many men make this mistake or at least variations of it at one time or another. It's just that some of us twig before it's too late or get the opportunity to talk

through problems and work things out with our partners before succumbing to the inevitable split. I didn't get either luxury. It was final. Over. *Done*. As quick and effective as a guillotine.

It took the rupture of Lara's leaving, the separation and the subsequent fast-tracked divorce (I got the full treatment 12 months later: sheriffs at the door with pepper spray on their belts and court papers scrunched up in their fists) for me to confront what I had become. And that was a fat fuck-up who, deep in the midst of a decade-long relationship, had somehow lost his way, eating tubs of Ben & Jerry's ice cream in front of *Jerry Springer* at two in the morning.

Begrudgingly, but much later, I even came to admit my wife might have been right to leave me. Physically, I wasn't in the least bit attractive. I was pasty, had two chins and man tits, a bowling ball for a head. I dressed badly. My gut was so large I couldn't even see my dick when I looked down. I hadn't been that way when we'd first met. I convinced myself that I was too busy writing my book to exercise but that was only a small part of the story. I was a disappointment to myself and must have been a frightful sight to Lara, especially naked.

It wasn't like my personality was exactly making up for it either. For years I'd been afflicted with major depression and a particularly nasty variant of obsessive-compulsive disorder called 'Pure-O' or purely obses-

sional OCD, which had rendered me completely useless for a large part of the final years of our marriage.

OCD. The Wagnerian opera of headfucks. I was bombarded around the clock by disturbing thoughts. Every minute of every hour. The worst kind of thoughts imaginable. And I didn't know where they were coming from, why I was having them or how to stop them.

Antidepressants didn't help. Whatever my doctors prescribed – a lucky dip of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) – just made me fatter and more miserable. Cognitive behaviour therapy with some of the best psychiatrists available couldn't unlock the problem. No matter how much I wanted to get out of the black hole I was in, I didn't know how. I physically and emotionally existed for Lara and wanted to be there for her, but rarely was.

For a long time my wife tried to understand what I was going through and be there for me, and I put her through a lot, telling her frankly what was plaguing me and seeking her reassurance that I wasn't going mad, but I don't think she ever quite *got* it. I tried to give her books to read, but they went unopened. Eventually, when a doctor suggested that in fact she might be depressed too and wrote her a prescription for Prozac, she'd had enough.

Lara told me the only thing that made her unhappy was me. She was going to let me claw out of this trough

all by myself and get back what was left of her own life. Of course I didn't agree with her decision – I felt she had given up on us as a couple and the three of us as a family when I needed her most – but there was nothing I could do about it.

What I could do, though, was become the man I used to be and was capable of being once more – not just to resuscitate my self-esteem but to stand a chance of ever having a meaningful relationship again, with Lara or anyone else. And late at night for weeks and months after the separation, feeling the most alone I'd ever felt in my life, my wife, best friend, family, pet, identity, physical condition, mental health, dream of siblings for Evie and storybook future wrested away from me by a confluence of bad luck, fate and reawakened female needs, winning Lara back was all I could think about.

Of course, I was going to go absolutely the wrong way about it.



When an old girlfriend alerted me to a studio that had just been listed for rent in Darlinghurst in Sydney's inner east, it seemed as good a place as any to get myself sorted out. Lara had moved to an undisclosed address. My temporary plan to stay at my mother Sal's

house wasn't working out. Though she dressed like a car crash between Vivienne Westwood and Winnie Mandela and decorated her house with junk salvaged from the side of the road, Sal, a retired glass artist, had made a substantial fortune in real estate by 'following the ferals' up and down the east coast of Australia. Her hard and fast rule: wherever the artistic types went, the yuppies and their money followed. She'd done particularly well out of the 'Bs' – Birchgrove, Balmain, Broken Head, Belongil, Byron Bay and Bundeena – which had seen her amass millions while maintaining the carefully cultivated appearance of a batshit-crazy eccentric.

She'd taken me in when my wife had dropped her bomb and was doing her best to help me through a crisis she said she'd seen coming long ago. But there was a reason I'd moved out 15 years before. We weren't meant to live together. Under the same roof, and in the fragile emotional state I was in, for the way we got on she might as well have been a gorgon and not the woman who'd brought me into the world. We fought over who was to blame for the separation. Sal thought I'd neglected Lara. I had, but I hadn't been in a frame of mind to take care of myself, let alone her needs. When I walked in on my mother calling me a 'cunt' on the phone to Lara, it was time to go. There are some things a son should never hear; being called a 'cunt' by your mum just about tops the list.

The east had a reputation for being expensive, superficial, narcissistic and class-driven and it was well earned: it was all those things, a part of Sydney where waterfront real estate, European clothing labels, model girlfriends and ready access to cocaine and the Facebook walls of Double Bay plastic surgeons were the marks of one's status in the unspoken but inextricable nexus of beach, café, bar and club. 'North Bondi relationships', where two attractive but vacant people paired off for no other reason than to look good together, were de rigueur.

Having spent most of my formative years in and around the more grounded inner west, the east was everything I loathed, hated and despised but it was what I needed. I wanted to be somewhere new; to disappear; to have the time and space to process what had happened to me and do whatever it was going to take to be at least remotely palatable to Lara on the few occasions we came together. And, if the opportunity arose, to other women.

The idea of being with anyone else, however, was completely alien to me at that time. All through my marriage I'd been so in love with Lara, so sexually satisfied and so content with the life we had that I never had to stray. I hadn't even so much as looked at another woman; I hadn't had to.

Except for one. Her name was Brooke and she

worked for the same magazine company I did, in the advertising department. At 24 she was like a mirror image of Lara ten years before. I was helplessly attracted to her and she knew it and liked it. One afternoon, months before the separation, she invited me to a picnic at a cricket oval near where we worked on Sydney's north shore.

I sat there longing to touch this identikit of my wife as a younger woman. The sexual tension in the air was unbearable. I had the urge to lean over, kiss Brooke's neck and twirl a strand of her blonde hair around one of my fingers in the bright winter sun. The scene was like a 1970s Flake commercial. She was breathtaking.

But in truth what turned me on most about Brooke was that she reminded me of the woman I was already married to, the same woman I was starting to have trouble connecting with at home. So I told Lara what had happened; that I'd been tempted for the first time in all our years together but had had an epiphany and come to realise just how important she was to me. My flirtation with this young girl had actually made our marriage stronger. I was being as honest as I could be and was convinced that I was doing the right thing by our relationship but it was a grave mistake. Lara said it was all perfectly fine and she appreciated my honesty but I knew something was amiss in her response. She hadn't bought it. Worse, she now

had a green light to flirt with other people herself. We grew even more distant. Lara began spending more time with her friends, playing gigs with her band, going out to pubs and clubs. Eventually she told me she was unhappy and wanted us to try counselling. I agreed to it but underestimated the depth of her dissatisfaction. I thought we were working on our communication but she was getting ready to end our relationship. When we came out of a session and she told me that she loved me I took it as a sign nothing would ever happen to us. I eased off when I should have been making the biggest effort of my life to save what we still had. Blithely while we were stuck in gridlock traffic one afternoon I even snapped that she could walk away if she was going to remain so unhappy.

‘If you really feel that way, Lara, then you should leave,’ I said, gripping the steering wheel. ‘I don’t ever want you to be unhappy.’

What I was trying to say in typically miscocked fashion was that I loved her so much that I would never stand in the way of her happiness. But what she heard and took in was something else altogether.



I didn’t have to wait long for confirmation that we were in deep trouble. Lara came home late one night from a

day with her friends at a horseracing carnival, highly intoxicated and wanting action. I was in bed after a day of writing my book. She climbed on top of me, still in her fascinator, and fucked me in a way she never had before. Aggressive. *Hard*. Like I was someone else. Her eyes were distant and wouldn't meet mine. When it was over, I started crying. Spontaneous tears. Lara started crying too.

'I'm sorry, darling,' she said, hugging me. 'I don't know what's going on with me.'

She looked deeply sad.

'Is there someone else, Lara? Tell me the truth.'

'No.'

I didn't believe her but we pressed ourselves together tightly, saying nothing for what felt like hours. Just holding each other as close as we could.

I didn't get any sleep that night. I have no idea what was going through her head.

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For months after the separation I was telling any woman I'd meet this story. They looked at me with sympathy. They said it was clear there was another man involved and, in the event there wasn't, that night of unpleasant sex had been the beginning of the end.

They were wrong. It had been over well before then

but I had allowed myself to suspend all my instinct for panic and think we were going to be alright; that the whole point of marriage was getting through troughs, emotional or otherwise, and emerging out the other end with a relationship that was even stronger for the experience.

As we sat on that bed, Lara told me she'd left our relationship long ago, an 'oppressive weight' was off her shoulders and she wasn't coming back.

I was, in her eyes, controlling, insecure, needy and possessive. (Which was probably true, given I'd been convinced for years that she wasn't going to stick around when I remained so sick.) I required too much looking after. Her love for me had turned into a duty. She worried too much about me. I'd worn her down. She wanted lightness, not the darkness I emanated. She was going to make a new life and she didn't want me to know where she was going with Evie.

Or, naturally, the name of the man she was now with. But I'd find out both soon enough.