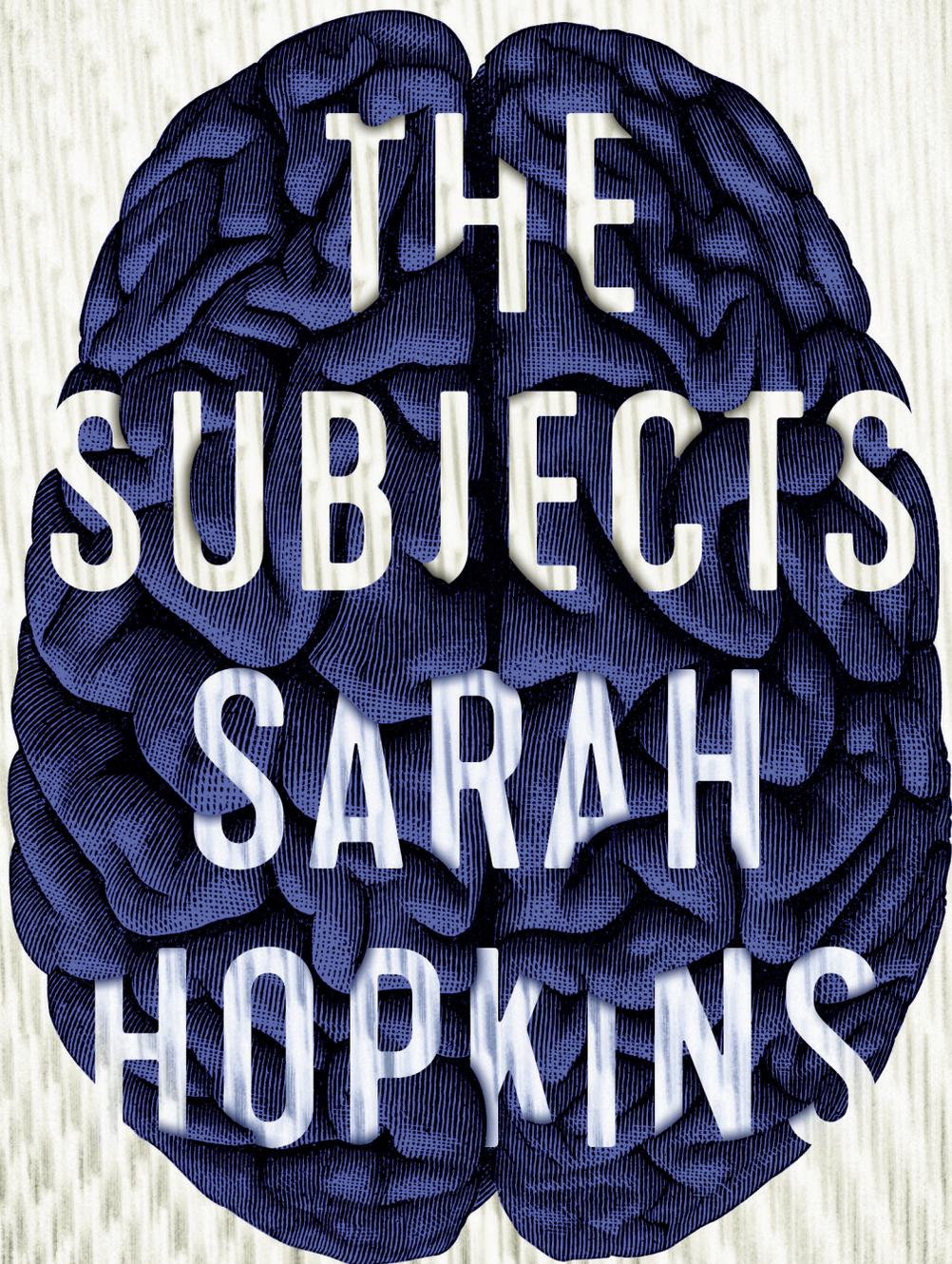


'Compelling from the opening pages...a book of complex ideas that is also alert to the art of storytelling.'

CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS



Transport

What I could see outside was nowhere I'd ever been. Fields of dry stubble, train tracks beyond them. Clumps of blackened trees. Inside, a new-car interior and the driver's headphones leaking a tinny treble of white noise. When I tried the window it wouldn't open. I wasn't surprised; in the movies, the windows never open.

Questions started to form but didn't take hold. The events of the morning, the pounding on the door and her mad, bleary eyes; the courtroom, the man standing at the back. All of it flashed past with the fields and the trees, scattering somewhere in the outback sameness. At some point it occurred to me to slide over to get a view of the dash. It was 4.24 pm, and outside it was 24 degrees: a synergy of time and temperature. Reassuring. I had no control

over where we were going, but somehow it was the right road. I sat back.

A little later, a heat haze rose out of the black tar ahead, and rising out of the haze I saw a figure. A man? A man waving his arms. I leaned forward as the van approached him and tapped the driver's plastic shield. Could he see it too? The driver didn't turn, and then the man on the road stopped waving and disappeared, just the shadow of a tree branch and a clump of roadkill.

I looked back to double check. Right: *it never happened*. And the rest of it? From the moment I woke up, the banging on the door. *It never happened*.

Except it did. The courtroom—the dark suits and stern faces.

The objective seriousness, the supply of drugs...

Vulnerable school children...

The level of sophistication and the public harm.

The fact that I was a vulnerable child myself—my 'sorry history'—was no excuse.

My lawyer did her best. She got all flushed as she painted the dead-set tragedy of my home life.

'Where is his mother now?' the judge interrupted. He looked too young to be a judge but he talked like an old man.

'At home, your Honour. Her condition is such that she doesn't leave the home.'

That cut two ways. On the one hand the absence of a fully functioning parent explained why I was such a fuck-up. But it also meant the prospect that it would change any time soon wasn't great. That is where the judge seemed to land.

'You are an extremely intelligent boy, Daniel. The reports all tell me that. It is a gift, and I find it very sad to see how you have chosen to use it.' He turned away from me and back to the lawyer. 'We are talking about a *very* sophisticated and *very* lucrative

operation here. This was an established pattern of behaviour that put the health and welfare of dozens of children at risk.’

‘Yes, your Honour, but today he is pleading guilty and that demonstrates—’

He didn’t let her finish the sentence. He had ‘formed the firm view’—I’m not sure how—that my early plea indicated indifference to my fate rather than evidence of remorse.

He was half-right. It wasn’t remorse, but I did care. The thought of going into juvenile detention made me want to peel off my skin. I told the lawyer I wanted to plead guilty and get it over with because I am one of those people who can’t have a blade hanging over their head and go on pretending it isn’t going to fall. They are the same people who eat the bad stuff on their plate first—always have, always will. I knew how it was going to turn out. I’d done it. I knew I’d done it; they knew I’d done it. I’d done it before and I’d done more and worse and the likelihood was I’d do it and more and worse again. True fact. Hard as it was, there was only one way forward: suck it up, swallow, move on.

The judge launched into a loud and lengthy sermon about the need to send a message. Not just to me, but to all the young people like me, the whisper of deterrence in the ear of our future selves...

(I mean for fuck’s sake. Show me a kid who stopped in his tracks and veered a different way because of something a judge said one time. This is just bad science. Real consequences—certain and known consequences—barely weigh in, let alone the double maybe of what *might* happen *if* you get caught. Actions are determined by immediate, front-and-centre reasons to act; and I had plenty of reasons to take money from kids looking for pharmacological assistance. So, sure, lock someone up because you want him off the streets for a while. Just don’t couch it in all the bullshit.)

Anyhow, the upshot: today there was no alternative. Full-time custody. I was going in.

And then I wasn't.

Behind me there were muffled whispers and the judge started looking over my head. I turned around and saw, standing at the back of the courtroom, a man with a pale grey suit and a mop of black hair combed in a side part. I'd never laid eyes on him before, but he smiled at me and nodded at the judge and the judge raised his eyebrows, like it was part of a secret code. And all of a sudden, the wind changed direction.

'Very well,' said the judge. 'I can see merit in that.' This was in reply to nothing anyone had said. 'We just need to be satisfied that he is not currently on any form of medication.'

'We have that information,' replied the man in the grey suit. 'He was taken off clonidine in May.' The accent was foreign, but very slightly, and not from anywhere in particular. A bit of east and west.

The judge peered down at me again like it hurt his eyes to do it and, without looking at me a second time, made a hurried pronouncement placing me on an order for twelve months under section whatever, my release conditional upon compliance with blah blah...And so forth.

'Daniel, do you understand what I have said?'

I nodded.

'You are not free to go home, Daniel. I have ordered that you enter a residential program to address the issues underlying your behaviour. You will be taken directly from the courthouse to the location. What this means is that you are a lucky young man. Please don't forget that.' Leaning forward, he repeated it slowly. '*A very—lucky—young—man...*Do you understand that, Daniel?'

I said I did; I understood.

And the blade didn't fall. I slid into the back seat of a van, with a driver who was not the man in the grey suit, on my way to find out what 'lucky' meant.

I'd slid deeper down into my seat and drifted into sleep, and when I woke up my mouth was dry and my head was an old sore and when the window still wouldn't open I banged it with the palm of my hand. More than once. It was me and the world again, and though we'd never been on this particular road, the feeling was familiar, the bond between us unchanged. I banged the window again, then the driver's shield, and I told him I was going to keep banging until he pulled the fucking car the fuck over.

It was more effective than I'd anticipated. He flicked his headphones out and slowed the van—to give me an earful, I thought. But no, right there and then, the van turned off the road. Not because I banged. Because we had arrived.

Intake

A white-pebbled driveway cradled on either side by plump eucalypts and greenish fields. At the top of the driveway, a sandstone building.

In another story, an orphaned cousin would come up with a lot of ways to say it was big and pretty. I'd read books like that and I always skipped those bits. I wasn't going to let myself be fooled by a few blocks of sandstone. As we got closer, I could see that behind the sandstone was another building—curved concrete; purpose-built. But no fence, no wire. Not a bar in sight.

A very lucky young man.

I sat up and craned at the dash—6 pm and 22 degrees, which didn't give me a lot to work with, a single prime factor—then the driver swung his long legs out the door and, as he stretched

his arms to the sky, the front door of the building opened and a guy stepped out. A flop of blond hair, fine-rimmed glasses; a white short-sleeved shirt, striped cotton pants and sandals. He was smiling but he didn't walk towards the van.

I climbed out. Turned back to the driver. 'What is it? This place?'

He shrugged and passed me my backpack. 'You know as much as I do.'

He looked like he wanted to say something else. His voice was soft and something made me regret the window-banging and wish he wasn't going to get into the van and drive away. But he did, and I watched him go.

When I turned back, the blond man was gone, the door still open, leaving me with the impression that whether or not to walk through it, the decision was mine.

Inside was what looked like a doctor's waiting room. The blond man stood next to a reception desk, still smiling, but bravely, like he was bracing for something. Close up, his face was pock-marked and his roots were black.

'Could I take your height and weight?' he asked.

I shrugged.

'Sorry.' He extended his hand. 'I'm Greg.'

'Daniel.'

'Yes.'

I was about to give him some rough numbers when he guided me to a set of scales with a white measuring rod mounted on the wall behind it. He made a note (176 cm and 63 kg), then directed me to help myself from the water cooler.

'I shouldn't think he'll be too long.'

I didn't ask who it was I was waiting to see or tell him that I had a cracking pain in my head and was hungry enough to eat his eyeballs.

The room had three doors: the outside entry, the one through which Greg left, and another one on the opposite wall. My guess was that I was waiting to see someone sitting behind the third door, and that Greg was standing on the other side of his with one of those new slimline taser guns somewhere in his stripy pants. (That was the go in those days if you worked with the bad or the mad: non-lethal self-protection at your disposal.) Still, I was surprised to be left alone. That didn't seem like normal procedure.

I sat in the chair facing door three, scanned the ceilings for CCTV (none that I could see), and drank three glasses of water. 176; 63. I busied myself with that for a while, mashing it up and finding a sequence, before landing back on the unsatisfactory facts—I was 16 years old and 176 cm. The man sketched in my memory with the label 'father' had predicted I'd have 'real height'; the fact that I hadn't grown in two years wouldn't have worried me otherwise, but it was the only talking memory of him I had.

Would he have cared whether I'd blitzed a test or scared away the tenants or managed (by whatever means) to save \$23K by my sixteenth birthday? I had no idea. I just knew he'd thought I would be tall. Then I doubted whether he'd said it at all, whether it was just something I'd got from the TV.

Anyhow, 176; 63; 16: they were my numbers and here I was. As the pain in my head eased, I placed them inside the food pyramid info-poster on the wall in positions that might best reflect the relative size of the angles, then paced across the room a couple of times and checked an empty drawer in the reception desk. My options exhausted, I opted for the second door, Greg's door.

I was wrong. Greg wasn't on the other side of it. When I describe what was there—in terms of understanding the impact of what I saw—keep in mind that in my day-to-day, up until this point,

I was one of those people who know the lie of the land. People, places, situations didn't surprise me; rainbows didn't shoot out of thunderclouds. And this—what was on the other side of the door—being but one of a number of surprises in a single day... at a limbic level, it resonated. There was a shift, a stirring of the dopamine; that's all I'm saying.

I stood alone—no Greg, no taser—in a circular corridor surrounding a large internal courtyard. The entire inner wall was made of glass, so that in the fading light I could see right across the courtyard and around the whole arc of the corridor. There was a series of closed doors over two storeys with timber stairwells at opposite ends. The sheer scale of it, and the contrast with the ordinary little waiting room, not to mention all the rooms in all the mean buildings that came before it—the windowless bedroom, the fluoro-lit kitchen, the damp-stained classroom—it was as though I'd stepped into another world. It was a concrete Tardis with a core of natural light and, at its centre, three fruit trees in massive, milky-white planter pots. I found out later they were pear trees.

Later, I read the descriptions in the transcripts, the intention behind the whole design. But even that day—the moment I laid eyes on it—I understood there was symmetry to the structure that was intended to influence those inside it. The impression was fluid and full of future promise, as if one day the whole building would take off into the sky. And of course, the trees: *pyrus nivalis*. It was summer now and they were in full leaf, shading the slatted benches and casting dappled shadows over the pebbles, but I'd soon see for myself that the real show was in autumn when the leaves turned purple and gold and began to fall.

Later, when counsel assisting the inquiry stopped interjecting and let Dr J speak, that is what he talked about—a full page of transcript on why he picked the trees: the abundance of the

spring blossom and the softness of the silver-green leaf but, most important of all, the fact that it would for some time stand bare—life and death, growth and renewal.

‘Put your cross on a mantel,’ he said. ‘I will plant my pear tree.’

Looking at it all for the first time, I had to give myself a moment to take it in. My chest emptied as I began to weave the setting into a mental narrative: *I belong here, in a purpose-built home for lucky young men, shaded by a branch in the courtyard and surrounded by others like me. Slow build to crowd scene and we are marching with the fervour of purpose (it doesn't matter what that purpose is, the point is that we have one). A soft-focus filter in the pinky golden sun and there am I, front row, centre left, blending into the crowd...* It started to build into a beautiful crescendo—*all of us, side by side*—when something drew me out of it.

A question: where were they, the others?

Setting aside the lure of light and space, I looked around me again and all I could see were the empty corridors. I heard footsteps, but saw not a soul. Then the sound of a slamming door. And bang—I could feel it creeping back, the real story. I was caught. This was not prison, but it was my prison. I had been plucked out of my life and placed in the unknown, the empty corridors and the courtyard and the waiting room, nothing more than a trick of time and light.

Somewhere there is a report I haven't found that kicks off with a baseline: status of Daniel G pre-intervention. It will read that I was oppositional defiant or ADHD. Some such description, plenty to pick from.

My input is that standing and viewing my new surrounds that first day, I hoped for something different but feared it would only be the same.

Hope and fear, slot that in somehow.

‘Did you need something?’ Greg, with a hand on my shoulder. Strangely gentle; just fucking strange. I shoved his hand away and stepped back with the urge to get the hell out of there. I guess he read it, nodding his head like he understood. ‘It’s okay,’ he said. ‘He’s ready for you now.’

Back in the waiting room, Greg tapped on the third door before opening it.

I stepped inside. In front of me was a desk covered in framed photographs and, at the other end of the room, a pair of wing-backed chairs. Seated in one was a man holding a piece of paper close to his face like he was straining to read it. The curtain was partly drawn, leaving a lamp—a cloudy glass tulip—as his source of light, and the rest of the room, including me, in relative darkness.

‘Daniel,’ the man said. ‘Come and sit.’ The quiet voice was familiar, the lilting accent. When he pulled the page away I saw that it was the man in the grey suit from the back of courtroom. The jacket was gone now, the striped shirt sleeves pushed up his arms and wedged on an impressive pair of triceps.

I never liked to be told to sit. It meant you’d done something wrong or you were about to be forced to dredge up something you wanted to let lie.

‘My name is Dr J. We met in a roundabout way in the courtroom this morning.’

I nodded. I did not sit.

‘You must be famished,’ he said, asking Greg to bring us some food. And after Greg had left: ‘So, what now?’

I waited for him to answer his own question but he didn’t, instead directing me to ‘please have a drink’. Beside him on a small table was a glass jug with pieces of lemon floating in it and two glasses. He filled them and passed one over. The drink was sweet

and very cold and smelled like the jasmine growing on the bus shelter outside our flats.

‘It might be more comfortable if you took a seat.’ His eyes were dark and far apart. They moved down to the seat on offer and then back again to meet mine in an entreaty that was both gentle and firm. The chair itself—I didn’t wait to be asked again—was an armchair covered in worn green velvet. It felt good enough to sleep in.

When I finished the drink he handed me the piece of paper he’d been reading as I entered. I looked down at the page in my hands. The first line was in bold and read: *As between Daniel G and the School.*

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘It is a contract.’ That trace of an accent. Even when he spoke his lips remained in a half-smile.

I looked back to the page. The next line was a heading: *The Conditions*, and under that it was blank (rendering the document, as far as I could understand, meaningless). ‘Where do I sign?’ I said.

He smiled more fully. ‘Let’s you and I draft something first. Think it over for a day: what you want of me, and what you are prepared to give...’

About that time Greg reappeared with a tray of finger sandwiches, put them on an empty table with two plates and left without speaking. Dr J motioned for me to help myself, and I piled my plate high with two of each mystery filling. When I was sitting down again and eating, he helped himself too; we ate for a few minutes in silence. I can’t really explain why I was relaxed enough to do that, only to say that I was hungry and the fancy sandwiches were as good as cake and I was comfortable in my velvet chair. Nothing bad had happened yet. Maybe if I could just let things slide for a while and wander around the luminous corridors, how

could it hurt? It didn't mean I was falling for the 'let's you and I' bullshit; I only had to go back to this guy's coded conversation in the courtroom to know where he sat in the scheme of things. It was a skill that throughout my almost seventeen years had served me well: how to peg people. Teachers, lawyers, customers...if you gave me ten minutes, I could tell you who to trust.

I started: "'The School.'" The judge said it was a program. You say it's a school now?'

With his mouth still full he shrugged and nodded simultaneously. 'What happens if I leave?'

He put the rest of his sandwich back on his plate. 'What would happen to you if you left?' He appeared genuine in his need for clarification.

'If I woke up in the morning and walked out the door.'

He shook his head. 'How would I know?'

'I mean, do you call the cops?'

He gestured towards the piece of paper now sitting under my plate. 'There is no fine print in there, Daniel. It is blank, a clean slate, as we call it.' His eyes held firm again and I noticed that his face was without symmetry: a high forehead and a severe side part, the left eye larger than the right, so that the bushy eyebrows were uneven, one a little higher and more arched. His nose deviated to the left with a pronounced bump at the bridge, and at the right corner of his full lips there was a small raised purple scar.

The face was a roughly drawn map of a shadowy place you wouldn't want to linger in too long; but his physique, that was something different. His collar was a little tight. Above it, an Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed. And then his triceps. You could watch them as he moved, and the little muscles down his forearm, the blue-green veins beneath skin that was a fine, poreless olive. No excess, nothing wasted, nothing wanting. If I'd

been that way inclined, it might have been arousing. As it was, I just found something reassuring in his physicality.

‘This is what they gave us,’ he continued, pointing to a folder on the table with the tulip lamp. ‘The file that travels with you. I have only read the cover sheet but if you prefer me to read more I will do that.’

‘I’d prefer it if you gave it to me.’ Part-joke, but he didn’t get it.

His reply was straight-faced: ‘That wasn’t one of the options.’

Now, as I recall this, I see the Doctor was responding as he did to most things—in his peculiarly literal way, any of the subtleties of nuance or sarcasm sliding through to the keeper. But that day as he spoke, I took it as his declaration of authority, and it threw me immediately onto the attack.

‘Like it’s going to make a difference if I want you to read it or not,’ I said. ‘Like you haven’t read it already. I’m not an idiot. I don’t know who you are or what this place is. I just want to know what I need to do to get signed out...’

(I hear it: these are not the words of a boy filled with hope and fear. But I tell you, they are precisely that.)

At some point while I was speaking he dropped his eye contact and reached over to make a note on a piece of paper on the table, ceasing to react in any way to what I said or to the anger in my voice. Again, now I can read it—this was his habit: for lack of relevance, a speaker would lose his attention. In his mind our interview was complete. For the time being he did not need anything else from me; I may as well not have been speaking at all.

‘And now,’ he said as he continued to write, ‘if you’re happy to stay with us tonight, I’ll get Greg to show you your room.’ I hadn’t noticed Greg come in but he was back, standing behind me. ‘And tomorrow morning after a good sleep you can find your feet. Let’s meet back here when you’re ready, how does that sound?’

The answer in my head was that I had a business to get back to and I wouldn't still be here at the end of tomorrow, but I was exhausted and played along, said goodnight and followed Greg out of the room. We walked through the waiting room and into the corridor.

Now it was darker there were lights at the base of the big pots in the courtyard that made the pear trees glow. There was the sound of quiet voices, which I traced to the back of a pair of straw-coloured heads sitting out of the light between the planters. With their hair cropped short, I couldn't tell if they were boys or girls.

I stopped. It looked good out there. Private.

'The sisters,' Greg said. 'They're having dinner. Do you want to meet them?'

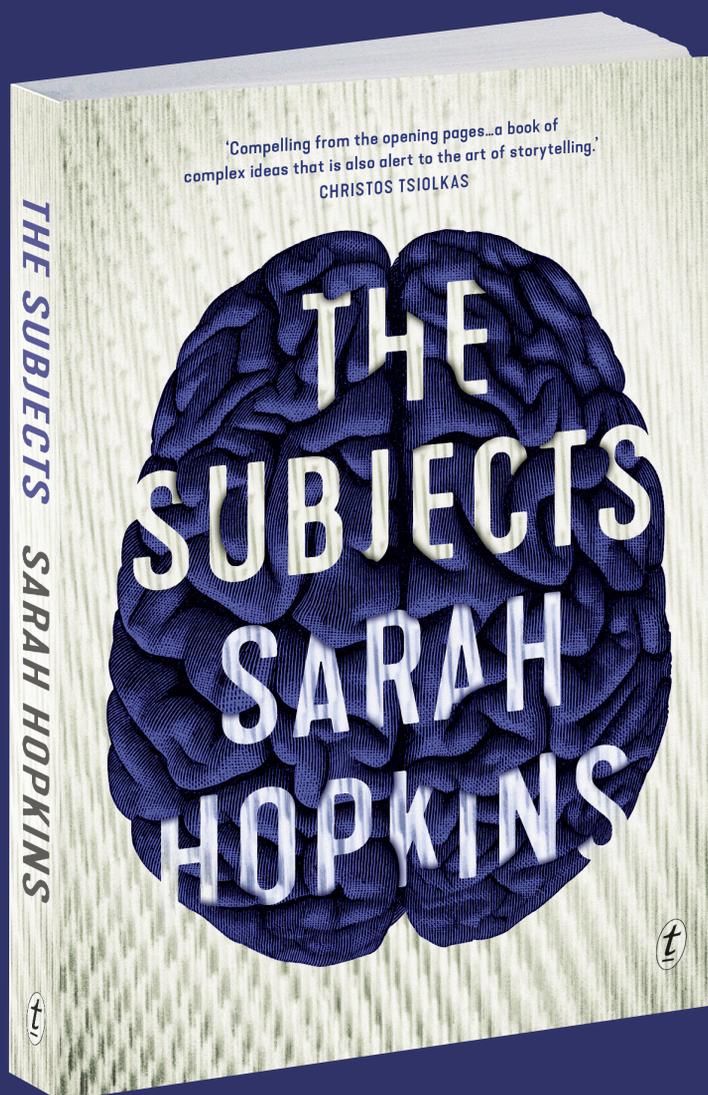
I did but I couldn't. I needed to sleep. I needed to sleep, then I needed to wake up and obtain the information necessary to make a plan.

During the inquiry a decade later, the Doctor was asked under cross-examination about the file he pointed to in his office that first day, and in particular the absence of a single entry during my seven-month stay. His response was that he could not add to the file because he hadn't read it in the first place. Then came pages of long-winded and cryptic questioning by the counsel assisting as to how he had conducted assessments in light of such an omission, culminating in this:

COUNSEL: I take it then that you had no regard for the conclusions of every other professional involved up to that time in the lives of these students? Every doctor or teacher or therapist, you thought it right to disregard? Are you familiar, Dr J, with the term 'God complex'? You didn't feel you were playing God, just a little bit?

After years of laying the blame with him, I re-read the answer a number of times and I smiled like an older man recalling a fond childhood.

DR J: No, I did not. Keeping with your metaphor, I was not playing God; I was trying to block out the noise so that I could hear him.



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