


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Candy

Luke Davies

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About the Author

Luke Davies was born in Sydney in 1962. He has worked variously as a truck driver, teacher and journalist. Luke Davies' collection of poetry *Absolute Event Horizon* was shortlisted for the 1995 Turnbull Fox Phillips poetry prize.

ALSO BY LUKE DAVIES

Poetry

Absolute Event Horizon

Fiction

Candy

Luke Davies

CANDY



*Have the gates of death been opened unto thee?
or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?
Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth?
declare if thou knowest it all.
Where is the way where light dwelleth?
and as for darkness, where is the place thereof?*

Job XXXVIII, 17-19

PROLOGUE

EXAMPLE OF GOOD TIMES: CANDY'S FIRST OVERDOSE

In the beginning: Sydney, summer.

EVERYTHING'S FUCKING BEAUTIFUL! I'm so in love. I've just met Candy, it's been a month or two. We're discovering each other's bodies. Candy's just discovered smack and I've just discovered she's got a bit of money. Keen as all fuck to get dirty.

Candy's got the bluest eyes I've ever seen, a kind of mist you fall into. It's weird how you can be going along, and all you're thinking about is heroin, and then you meet someone, and other thoughts get in there. It makes it like meeting Candy was meant to happen. Things were getting hairy, as they tend to when you're using. As always, I was enjoying the gear. It can be all right being alone. But partnership is a good thing and helps focus your energies.

We did a credit card scam together, and Candy's still reeling from the adrenalin rush. She thinks we can be like Bonnie and Clyde, me handsome, her beautiful, both of us glamorous and full of sex and ready to take on the world. I suppose I mean Dunaway and Beatty. Anyway, falling in love is kind of exciting.

She walks around the house naked all day, her body lithe and lank and lovely. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, naked or clothed. Not a blemish. Her cunt smells nice. She laughs a lot. She runs several baths a day and splashes about. She fools around with make-up for ages. She wears her long blonde hair in wild pigtailed. She looks like Annie Oakley on a windy day. She reads sad Virago books with flowers and pale languid women on the covers.

She's just finding out what I found out a few years back, that thing that heroin does to you the first few times. She is over the moon. She's in the Miranda zone – O wonder! O brave new world! Things are good beyond belief. I envy her that innocence. Nowadays, when it really works – which is beginning to be not always – what I get from hammer is a kind of deep comfort. An absence of this and an absence of that. Absence of everything that prickles and rankles.

What Candy's getting is the angelic buoyancy, the profusion of colours. Good luck to her; it won't last long.

We fucked a few times then I told her I had a problem. Crying and all that. Holding my head in my hands, at least. Oh my life is so fucked up, I've got to stop. Can you lend me some money? At the time it's happening, misery is real. She was game. She was curious. Sure. How much do you want?

Really, to be honest, I guess I was just scamming for a bit of cash. Then the falling in love part began to happen a few days later. Because she came along for the ride. Because she was so willing.

She watched me bang up a few times. I told her, make sure you don't ever do this. She nodded, watching the plunger slide down the barrel. I don't know what it was she saw when I untied that tourniquet and lolled back, but it didn't make her go away.

After a week she started asking questions – what's it like? and how come you can't stop? – and I said to the first question, that's such a hard question to answer, and to the second question, I don't know. I said, if you really want to try some you can snort a bit. She was silent for a moment and then she said, nah. Nah, I don't think so.

The next day I had to go out and do stuff and I left a little package for her and said, if you want to snort some of that, feel free. But I don't mind if you don't. I got home in the afternoon and Candy was lying on the bed reading *The Robber Bridegroom* by Eudora Welty and the package was

still on the dressing table where I left it. Did you use that dope? I said. No, she said uncertainly, I didn't feel like it. That's good, I said, because I'm going to have it now.

I didn't offer her any more after that. Two days later I was mixing up for myself and she said, OK, I want to try some.

I was scraping some dope from a package into my spoon. I stopped what I was doing and laid out a thick line on a glossy magazine. She rolled up a twenty-dollar note and snorted the heroin. It seemed she started to really feel it at about twenty or thirty seconds. She was touching her nose and making short sniffing sounds and then she said woah.

She was puffing, like her breath was trying to catch up with something bigger and faster than her, something that was catching her unprepared and slamming her into a world that was different.

To me it seems, despite the signs that are beginning to say otherwise, that heroin is the greatest thing there is. I'm not trying to give Candy a habit. I'm not trying to fuck her life. I'm trying to make mine better. I'm falling in love with her and want to share with her absolutely everything, especially the best bits. And who wouldn't?

There are no glitches in everything we do. Everything is perfect, agreed upon, unspoken. Everything moves forward as if oiled by God's own grease.

That first snort, Candy had a ball. She lay around on the bed, mostly with her eyes closed, saying this is incredible, saying kiss me, touch me. After a while she said, I feel nauseous, I think I'm going to spew. I grabbed a bucket from the laundry and I said, after you vomit you'll feel better, it happens the first few times. She vomited into the bucket and wiped her mouth and said, even that feels fantastic.

She said, I want to try sex on this. I said, you probably won't be able to come and she said, *this* is coming.

Everything was electric, the horniness, the erections, the wetness, and of course we didn't come but fuck it was nice, in a trippy gymnastic kind of way.

The next day she was fazed and didn't talk about it. Then a couple of days later she says, can I have some more? I say, sure, and start to lay out a line for her. She says, not that way, I want to try it your way.

At that moment my heart moves and I feel so in love I want to cry. I know what's going on. What she is saying is, I don't want second-best. She's sensed already that if snorting is good then this will be infinitely better. I can feel the deep tugging of a kindred spirit, a twin.

I say OK. I look at her for a moment, at her big pupils about to become small. I nod my head. I say, sure.

I remind myself I have to be careful here. I get out my spoon and I mix up the smallest amount of hammer I can possibly imagine would do anything to anyone. Candy's wrapped a tie around her upper arm and it's way too tight. I unwrap it and there are purple lines like bands on her delicate skin. I show her how to tie a hoop that can be tightened or released quickly.

She holds out her arm and looks the other way. I tap the soft skin on the inside of her elbow and it's easy. The needle slides in and I pull the plunger backwards and a strong spurt of pink erupts into the liquid in the barrel, spreading up towards the 50 calibration in a cauliflower shape. I hold it steady and carefully push the plunger forward.

There, I say.

I pull the syringe from her arm and drop it on the table and hold my thumb down over the tiny hole I've made. I release the tie with my other hand. Candy looks down at her arm like a child who's relieved that the inoculation is over. Then she says, mmmm, and her facial muscles relax and she lies back on the bed and says, that is heaps better.

Heaps better. Fuck oh God. Fuck fuck fuck. This is the best. Oh God, this is awesome.

It's a beautiful afternoon in Leichhardt and I want Candy to experience more of it, not just the heavenly weight that descends on vertical bodies, not just the exquisite crush of inertia. She vomits a couple of times and I wipe her face with a towel and then she wants to close her eyes and nod off but I say, come on, let's go for a walk.

First I have another blast and get pretty ripped myself. The phone rings and it's Micky Fleck wanting a hundred and I tell him to wait along the bottom of Norton Street, at the Memorial Park, and I'll be coming through the park in half an hour. I make him up a package and Candy and I walk out into the sunlight.

We're arm in arm and I've never felt better in my life. The world is full of promise. My plan is that love will be stronger than heroin, and then we can get stuff done. The things we're meant to do in life. Candy's going to be an actress and I'll work something out too. We're just having a bit of fun right now, and soon, I suppose, it'll be time to stop. This is the way I'm thinking, when I think about it.

I can't see Candy's eyes behind her sunglasses, but I can tell from her grin that she's loving everything, the way you do in early days, the way narcotics integrate all the parts of the world. That's not an easy task. She's loving everything: the sunlight, the heat, the greenness of the day, the trees, the cars, the children in prams. There's a little council fountain in the middle of the park and Candy stops and sits beside it and runs her hand backwards and forwards through the cool water. She's staring mesmerised at the water. I know what it is: she's intrigued by the way her wrist breaks up the scallops of silver light that bob on the surface. It's summer, in a world that is shining and good.

I see Micky's car pull up and I wave and we wander over. Hi mate, how you going? I say. I lean into his window and drop the package in his lap and he tucks a hundred-

dollar note into my top pocket. Micky, this is Candy, I say. She's beaming. Hi. She holds out her arm and they shake hands.

Micky drives away and we walk up to the Italian coffee place and have a big plate of gelato, which Candy vomits up twenty minutes later on the way home. When does the vomiting stop? she asks, like she's preparing for a journey. Not long, I say. After a while you don't vomit, except when you're really sick.

Is that bad? she asks.

Hanging out? It's the worst, I say. Just don't get a habit, Candy, and you won't have to go through that.

We get home and lie down for a while and Candy says to me, there's better things in store for us than pain. It's an odd thing to say but I feel overwhelmed and I want to say something big in return. I really love you, Candy, I say. I was, er, thinking, do you want to -. Then I feel embarrassed and stop mid-sentence.

She rolls towards me and smiles. What? Get married?

I was going to say have a baby, actually.

She laughs. Well let's do both!

I think we have a great future, I say. She smiles even more, her eyes water. My heart feels like it's going to burst.

I kiss her, maybe the nicest long kiss I've had to that point in my life.

Then we fuck for an hour, and don't come, and finally stop when we both get a little raw and chafed.

The next day my younger brother Lex comes around. I'm not always on a roll, there are bad times too, but I've been getting this good brown Sri Lankan gear from T-Bar lately, and there's lots of it and everyone wants it from me. It's not all that heavily refined - it's not the Thai white or even pink rocks. It's alkaline, and you could say rough as guts. But it's pretty pure, because it came into the country in condoms up T-Bar's arse. I step on it one to one with chocolate Quik, and everyone's happy, including me.

So it's a time of abundance, and Lex, being family, is on the inner circle. I kind of sub-contract a bit to him and his friends get it, stepped on a little more. But still everybody's happy. Relatively speaking.

It's been a good day and I'm in a good mood when Lex arrives. Candy hasn't had any smack all day and she runs a bubble bath downstairs and says she wants to try some in the bath. She's searching for new experiences and I can understand. May she milk them until they run out. Lex and I have a whack in the bedroom, then I mix one up for Candy. I want her to have a nice blast, and she's been using for almost a week, so I make it a good amount.

We're minding the house for someone I don't even know, a friend of a friend of Candy. There are two bathrooms and the best one is under the house in a spacious converted cellar that opens out onto the backyard. The walls are rough sandstone and it's cool and musty down there. A claw-foot bath stands in the middle of the room.

I come down with the syringe. Candy has tied her hair up in a loose bun. She's pink and gleaming, sitting in the bath pouring water from a saucepan over her shoulders and back, so that steam is rising off her. I dry her arm with a towel and tie the tourniquet. I hit her up and release it.

She slumps forward and I know straight away that she's passed in an instant from full consciousness to full overdose. She doesn't moan or make any sounds of pleasure or say a word to me. Her head slumps forward so fast that her spine bounces twice in the reverberation. Her hair unties from the jolt and the ends of it flop down into the water.

Hey Candy!

I try to lift her head but her neck is rubber. I take her by the shoulders and pull her up, back into a sitting position. But her bum slides forward on the slippery surface of the bath. I'm badly positioned and her momentum carries her head backwards in an arc. I hold on for long enough to stop

her cracking her skull, but now her crossed legs are sticking out of the water at a right-angle down the plug end, while her head is trying to submerge itself up my end.

I stand behind the head of the bath and take her underneath the arms. I pull her back up into a sitting position. But she's dead weight, and the floor is wet from splashing, and it's hard to get her out any further. I'm a little breathless. You wouldn't call me fit.

I shout, Candy, Candy, and she might as well not be there.

I scream upstairs to Lex. He's on the nod and takes a while to answer.

What? he finally says, as if I'm extracting a tooth.

Quick, she's ODeD, give me a hand here.

He springs into action then. He comes down the stairs pretty fast.

What mate? He sees me standing there, slippery and soaked and trying to keep Candy upright.

I think I gave her too much, I say. Help me get her out.

He takes her legs and we lift her out of the bath and sit her on the edge. I slap her on the face a bit but her lips are turning blue.

This is not good, I say. I slap harder. Let's walk her around.

We take an arm each and sling it over our shoulders. We start to walk her around the room. Her head is slumped forward and her feet drag toes-down on the concrete floor.

The thought of an ambulance is not really appealing.

I think of a previous mishap, how T-Bar once saved the day.

Saline solution! I say. Lex, go upstairs, get a glass of warm water - and salt, put some salt in it. Stir it, dissolve it. Hurry!

How much salt?

I dunno, fuckin heaps. A couple of teaspoons.

Other parts of Candy's face are going blue by now. It doesn't suit her at all. We lay her on the cool floor and Lex runs up the stairs. I crouch beside her saying, Candy, Candy, wake up, wake up, and slapping her gently on the face.

Lex brings the glass. I clean Candy's syringe – some habits don't die, even in an emergency – and fill it with the salt water. Lex is one step ahead of me and tying a tourniquet. I hit Candy up with salt. It seems such a weird thing to do.

Lex unties the tourniquet and I'm wiping Candy's arm of the little trickle of blood and already her eyelids start to flutter. They open and close a few times, and she's not sure where she is. I lift her head a little. The colour is returning to her cheeks.

She's beginning to take it in. Her eyes focus first on me and then on Lex. Then she smiles a huge languorous smile and says, what's the matter boys? I feel several things at once. I feel relieved that she's OK. I feel glad that the salt thing worked, though maybe it's just a junkie myth, maybe all the slapping would have woken her up anyway. I feel proud of myself and Lex for getting it done. Most of all, I feel the thing that feels like love.

Candy is sitting up now, rubbing her face in slow motion, marvelling at the way her fingers feel on her skin. She's sitting naked in a puddle of water on the concrete floor, which I know would feel cold and delicious in the state she's in, coming out of such deep bliss. A cluster of bubbles from the bubble bath hangs on her collarbone like a bunch of tiny white grapes.

That was fucking beautiful, she laughs. Let's have some more!

Like I said, I'm so in love. I've got a real good feeling about this thing. A good feeling in my bones.

EXAMPLE OF BAD TIMES: SUGAR AND BLOOD

Much later: Melbourne, winter.

MY DAY IN the light, the day is darkening. I'm hurling all the little joys against the greater sadness. The sadness is a giant weight. It presses down. Its meaning: 'What's the point?' The little joys are pebbles. The pebbles are getting smaller and smaller and the weight of the sadness is growing, the sadness is gaining density and mass, until in the end I'm throwing handfuls of dust at matter so thick there's no space between the molecules. Nowhere anywhere for anything to move. The years roll on.

I can't stop. I just can't stop. I can't stop any more.

I'm sure it is possible, but no leap of the imagination can make it seem like it's possible.

There's a drought. Or you could say a flash flood. A flash flood of no heroin. Once every year or two, these things seem to happen. It's probably just a coming together of circumstances, like the way an eclipse occurs and it seems to be a message, that slide into darkness.

For two or three days, all the panicked phone calls, everyone ringing everyone else. Just enough dope to scrape by, deals from a friend of a friend of a friend, crap cut with so much sugar you barely feel it. Everyone saying, 'I hear there's some pink rocks coming tomorrow.'

Some phone calls come our way. 'If you get on to anything, we're waiting here with money.' I go right through my phone book. I ring Dirty Julie, so treacherous and unreliable she'd never get a call under any other circumstances. Hangs out with some fucked-up guys, the

rumour is they do home invasions and kidnappings. Very violent types.

But Dirty Julie says she has dope. 'What do you want?' she asks. I tell her I'll ring her straight back. I make a few calls. Everyone gets revved up. Secretly, I make up a packet of glucodin. Survival of the fittest in times of drought.

O'Brien and Victor and Maria and Schumann and Martin come around. Everyone piles into Victor's car, nobody wants to leave their money for too long. Candy waits at home. I'm the connection. Everyone is nervous, nobody is stoned. Drought brings out the worst in us and it's easy to hate your fellow human beings. We drive silently to Dirty Julie's, suspended inside the terrible tension in the car like pieces of fruit in jelly. I direct them to park around the corner. 'Wait here,' I say. Five of them crammed into the car in the dark street, and the space where I had been. Everyone smoking cigarettes, the inside of the car like a dark mist in which hover fireflies.

Dirty Julie and some of the boys are waiting in the lounge room. 'Hurry up, let's get this done, we have to go too.'

I should listen to my instincts. I know I'm getting ripped off, that they're hanging out too, that they're waiting for my money so that they, in turn, can go get on. But there's no turning back now. It's more than eighteen hours since I've had any smack. I just hope there's a little bit in the deal, enough to hold me until things get better. I'm buying dope for seven people, including Candy and me. Surely half of seven people's dope, even if it's a rip-off, should be enough to hold me. And then tomorrow, maybe, good times will come back.

I go through the motions. I taste the dope. It's got that doughy taste of a big cut. But I'm trapped in the momentum of ignorance now. 'I'm just going to take a little

for myself,' I say. They're all watching me, edgy. They're standing. I'm the only one sitting.

I take out half the dope, put it in a separate package, slip it down my socks. I add the same amount of my glucodin, give it a quick stir. This is what will happen. We will get back to the warehouse and try the dope - I will have to go through the pretence and hit up what I know to be mostly sugar - and everyone will realise they've been ripped off. They will all complain and grumble and I will apologise and say, how was I to know, what could I do? Finally they will disperse. And then I will have my private hit, and be OK. Even Candy can't know about this one. Times are tough.

But I get back to the car and they check the dope and freak. 'Take it back. We don't want it.' It's the official word. Everyone dipping their little finger and tasting it on their tongue. 'Take it back. This is shit.'

I've done a dumb thing. I am caught between a rock and a very hard place. But I have to pretend. The situation is fraught with peril. I will take the dope back, knowing that Dirty Julie and the boys will refuse, knowing that they saw me cut it.

Martin and Victor are angry. 'We're coming with you,' they say, following me around the corner. 'No,' I say, 'you'd better not come. They're heavy people.' It's the truth. 'You're not supposed to know where they live.' But I can see they don't trust me, and they keep following.

I don't have time to think. I don't know what to do. We arrive just as Dirty Julie and the boys are pulling the front door shut. 'Who the fuck are these guys?' the boys ask, gesturing angrily towards my friends.

'We want our money back,' Martin says behind me. 'This dope's shit.'

Everyone starts shouting at once then, and I'm in the middle trying to calm them all down. If the rumours are

true, I know one of these guys has killed. We mean nothing, my skinny St Kilda friends and I.

The boys are puffing their chests and leaning into our faces and shouting and it's getting menacing and ugly under the streetlight. Martin and Victor sense the violence and back off, hands in the air, saying, 'OK, OK, forget it.' Everyone moves away, grumbling, but heading in opposite directions.

My heart is beating. I'm thinking, Phew. Still got the dope down my sock. We get to the car but Dirty Julie and the boys have changed their mind. They screech around the corner in their own car, pull up to a halt outside ours. We know this is heavy now.

One of them jumps out, pointing at me. 'He cut the fucking dope anyway, he cut the fucking dope!' I'm almost in the door, last one in, but I step back out.

Arms in the air again, trying to calm him down. 'OK, OK, it's over, forget it.'

He's like a locomotive coming at me. He swings so hard and fast I don't even blink. His fist is a hammer cracking all over my face. I feel my nose break and I'm in the air and as the back of my head hits the gutter, hard, I become unconscious.

Then there's a gap in what I remember.

Because it's like coming out of a deep sleep. I'm groggy, and arms are pulling me into the back of the car. I must have been out for five or ten seconds. I can hear the squeal of tyres as Dirty Julie and the boys pull away, I can hear them screaming, 'You fucking cunts! You fucking cunts! Don't youse ever come back here again, you cunts!'

And I'm thinking how there's not much likelihood of that.

My nose is broken and both eyes are closed up and I'm crying because it hurts so much. The blood keeps pouring out. It's all over me, but someone's trying to hold an old rag to my face.

I'm sobbing, 'I didn't cut the dope, I didn't cut the dope,' because I have to make them believe me. I don't know if they do. They may well be torn between sympathy and anger.

And we get back to the warehouse and everyone has a hit and no one feels a thing. It's a ruined night.

Finally they all go, everyone resigned to their personal despair. Candy's bathing my face with warm water and a tea-towel. Even though she is sick, she is loving and gentle, and I love her. She says things like, my poor baby my poor baby it'll be all right. I keep wincing. Even the warm water hurts. After a while I can't wait any longer and I tell Candy I have to go to the toilet. The toilet is outside the warehouse, on the roof courtyard. I get some water in the syringe and lock myself in the cubicle and mix up. I say, 'Please God, if it's not dope, please make it dope.'

I inject it and nothing happens.

There is no warmth in my body. I drop the syringe and untie the tourniquet, usually an act that occurs in the onrush of bliss. Ten seconds, thirty seconds, a minute. I feel absolutely nothing. I drop my head in my hands, my fingers still sticky with blood.

I can no longer cry. I groan a few times. Through the slits that are my eyes, I stare at my shoes, at the grey swirls of the concrete floor, at the bright orange lid of my syringe. And I realise - it's a kind of horror - that this is my life.

And I can't stop. I just can't stop. I can't stop any more.

PART ONE

INVINCIBILITY

‘Now as soon as they had tasted the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus, they wished for nothing better than to stay where they were, living with the folk of that country and feeding on the lotus. They remembered their own homes no longer, nor did they yearn any more to return to their own land ...’

Homer, *The Odyssey*

CROP FAILURE

THERE WERE GOOD times and bad times, but in the beginning there were more good times. When I first met Candy: those were like the days of juice, when everything was bountiful. Only much later did it all start to seem like sugar and blood, blood and sugar, the endless dark heat.

But I guess the truth is, it didn't really take all that long for things to settle into a downward direction. It's like there's a mystical connection between heroin and bad luck, with some kind of built-in momentum factor. It's like you're cruising along in a beautiful car on a pleasant country road with the breeze in your hair and the smell of eucalypts all around you. The horizon is always up there ahead, unfolding towards you, and at first you don't notice the gradual descent, or the way the atmosphere thickens. Bit by bit the gradient gets steeper, and before you realise you have no brakes, you're going pretty fucking fast.

So what did we do, once the descent began? We learned how to drive well, under hazardous conditions. We had each other to egg each other on. There was neither room nor need for passengers. Maybe also we were thinking that one day our car would sprout wings and fly. I saw that happen in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. It's good to live in hope.

There was a time, after that Indian summer of our falling in love – after we'd gone through the money Candy's grandmother had left her, after we'd done a few scams and had a pretty good run for six months or a year – when we knew it would be good to slow down or stop and see where we were. It's funny how difficult that would turn out to be. It would be almost a decade before the car finally came to a silent stop on an empty stretch of road a long way down

from where we'd started. Almost a decade before we'd hear the clicking of metal under the bonnet and the buzzing of cicadas in the trees all around us.

In that first year Candy developed her first heroin habit. Like all the rest of us, no amount of words and warnings could prepare her for the horrors of drying out. So when we were forced to give it a go she was a little shaken by the power of the thing.

This was in Melbourne for her. Candy grew up in Melbourne and she went back there to dry out because we figured it would be too tempting to fuck up if we tried to do it together. It was her first habit, so she probably just needed a week at a friend's place with some good food and a trunk or two of pills.

I'd been gunning it now for a few years so the plan for me was to go to detox. T-Bar's Sri Lankan brown was still in abundant supply but I was starting to owe him more and more money. He was getting the shits with me. So I had some motivation to get things together in that department. I owed him money because my habit was really starting to get out of control. I'd noticed people like Micky Fleck and some other friends were calling me less often; maybe I wasn't so reliable any more.

The signs to stop were there. The plan was that Candy and I would link up in a week or two and be happy and healthy and maybe Candy would get pregnant. Then maybe we'd move to Melbourne, just to be on the safe side. Start a new life down there, away from the gear and all my Sydney connections.

Or maybe we could stay in Sydney and go back to hanging around with my old friends, my pot-smoking friends who held down jobs and went out on the weekends and seemed to enjoy their lives.

Mason Brown was one of these friends. Mason was six foot three, with a craggy face and sandy hair and a permanent grin. He loved his life like nobody I'd met

before. He loved smoking buds and he only ever had the best, the lie-back-and-laugh stuff. He loved live music. He even loved – loved with a passion – his job as a field officer with the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

We'd grown to like each other a couple of years earlier, when we'd done a lot of business and pulled a lot of bongs. Mason had stood by me as others started to avoid me. He was never one for getting moral. He got a little sad when he saw me fucking up. He never said anything stronger than, 'You really ought to stop this shit.' He bailed me out of little financial holes on several occasions, and never asked for the money back.

A few days before Candy left for Melbourne, we went out to see a band. Be social, be normal, have a bit of a preview of our life to come. There were lots of people I knew there, and a few of them gave me the dirty eyeball, and some of them spent a fair amount of time staring at Candy, who always stood out like a beacon of beauty.

Mason Brown was there. I hadn't seen him in a few months and we caught up on the news. After a while he gave me one of those searching looks and said, 'So – you OK?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Things aren't too good, Mason,' I said. 'I've got to stop. I really like Candy too. But she won't put up with it. It's not going to last if I keep this up. I want to travel. I want to go overseas. I want to do things. I'm going nowhere. I just need to knock it on the head. Go back to smoking. I wish I could do it like you.'

'You can, mate, you can.'

Mason seemed to have a blind faith in me that even I found embarrassing.

'I'll tell you what,' he added. 'I'll do you a deal. Grow a crop with me. We plant it, we look after it, we sell it, we go halves. We'll sell in bulk, don't fuck around with small things. You'd know a buyer. We'll make some good bucks.'

You and Candy can travel for a year, see a bit of the world, have some experiences. Get that monkey off your back.'

It was endearing and charming, the way Mason used the corniest old expressions. He even said 'junk' sometimes, as in, 'Keep off that junk and you'll be right, matey.' But he got me going with dreams of solid cash and a bright future. And he was the bud man, the gardener. I couldn't go wrong doing a crop with Mason. I knew also that he could grow a good crop quite successfully without me. That he was trying to be a friend.

'It's September,' he said. 'It's time to plant. It's already a couple of weeks late. But let's do it. I'm willing to bring you in on the plan. But here's the catch.' He looked at me sternly. 'Tonight's Friday. Next Friday night, or Saturday dawn, we leave. I know the spot, I've been checking some maps. So you've got seven days to dry out. If you're fucked up, we don't go ahead with it.'

I was stoned to the gills on the good Sri Lankan brown, so of course I could promise him the world. I was an endless reservoir of enthusiasm. We shook hands on it and I hugged him. 'Good on ya, mate,' we said to each other.

I found Candy in a crowd near the bar. I pulled her aside, bursting with the news.

'Guess what, sugar plum? We're going overseas, in a few months.'

I quickly filled her in. She seemed pleased enough. She knew that Mason represented a healthier life, so something involving Mason and me was better than something involving me and my own brain.

Seven days to get off smack. A new life. No problem, with this in front of me. I could do it on my head. The very thought of a successful detox made me feel warm and relaxed. I went to the toilet and found a cubicle with a lock that worked and had a nice blast to celebrate. Then I went outside to enjoy the band.

The next day I still had a gram of T-Bar's dope and some money to give him, and it's not like I was about to flush the gear down the toilet or anything. I'll make Saturday a good one to go out on, I thought. Things drifted into Sunday and Candy and I were getting sad about leaving each other for a week, so I gave T-Bar his money and got two more grams on tick. We sold a bit and used a bit.

On Monday we had our last blasts, several times, and we caught a cab to the bus depot for one of those sad and tawdry Eddy Avenue goodbyes.

'Hang in there, Candy,' I murmured as we hugged. 'When we see each other next week we'll both be feeling fine. Just get through this week, that's all.'

'You too,' she said. 'Don't fuck up.'

'Don't worry,' I said, 'I've had my last shot too.'

'I love you.'

'I love you.'

But the bus pulled out and we waved goodbye and suddenly I could feel the magnetic force of T-Bar's house dragging at the iron filings in my stomach.

As long as I stop by Tuesday night, then I should be half-OK by Friday night, I reasoned to myself.

By Tuesday I decided I might as well just keep using, get the crop planted, then go to a proper detox (which was the original plan) next week (which wasn't). I decided I would have a big hit just before we left early Saturday morning, and leave my dope at Mason's house, and white-knuckle it for twenty-four hours as a test of strength. I'd grit my teeth and be helpful and agile for Mason, and I wouldn't have small pupils, or nod off and have him cancel the whole deal.

So it was business as usual Wednesday and Thursday and Friday. At some point I rang Candy, who was sick, and told her I wouldn't be far behind. She was a little pissed off at my lack of stamina, but I assured her that I really just wanted to concentrate on the crop business for the time

being, and that things would be good, whatever the timetable.

Friday came and I organised to meet Mason at the pub where one of his favourite bands was playing. I hit up some coke before I met him so my pupils weren't too small. I told him I was feeling OK and that I'd got through the week. I smoked joints with him on the fire stairs and drank lots of beer as if to back up my story.

We got home to his place about one a.m. I was pretty drunk and we pulled some cones and I really could have done with a big sleep. Mason set the alarm for a quarter to five and said, 'We're out the door by 5.15, OK?'

I figured the beginning of a business venture must be the hardest part.

Mason shook me awake when he got out of the shower at five to five.

'Coffee's on. Jump in the shower.'

I took all my stuff into the bathroom and locked the door. The Sri Lankan gear was alkaline so I'd got a slice of lemon at the bar in the pub, wrapped it in a tissue and stuffed it into my shirt pocket. It was a bit dry and stiff now but it would have to do. I put the water and the heroin and a drop of lemon in the spoon and heated the mix and whacked it up.

I could have stayed in that fucking shower for hours. I'd had a real lot of heroin, thinking of the twenty-four hours ahead. It was a massively peak experience, drifting under that jet of water. Mason banged on the door and shook me out of the silver heat and dream-steam.

'It's ten past five. What are you doing in there?'

I dried myself, dressed, and walked out into the kitchen.

'Sorry, Mason,' I groaned, 'I'm a bit hungover.'

The kitchen's fluorescent light was very bright. I shielded my eyes.

I took my coffee upstairs to the spare room and hid my fit and spoon and dope under the bed. I felt a twinge of

nervousness leaving it there but I knew it would be good to have it to come back to. I felt certain I could make it through a day or a day and a half.

We were away at twenty-five past. It was dark and the streets were empty, so we had a good run north-west through Sydney. Mason was thoroughly prepared. His ute was loaded down with hoes and shovels and star posts and chicken wire, brown and green spray paint, fertilisers, cooking gear and sleeping bags and a tent. His professional attitude was reassuring to one in such a dissolute state. I felt I was in the hands of a winner. I told him I needed to sleep and I closed my eyes and enjoyed the stone.

A couple of hours out of Sydney there was a bright clear morning sky. The roads were getting narrow and we moved into some pretty isolated stretches of bushland. Mason eased the ute off the road and into a fire trail.

He pulled out one of those maps that serious bushwalkers use, a government-printed topographic thing with the squiggly contour lines and the heights in metres. It didn't mean much to me. Creeks, roads, fire trails, contour lines: they all looked the fucking same.

Mason was in his element. He directed me with his finger. I tried to focus my eyes and look interested, nodding my head here and there at concepts I couldn't grasp.

'This is where we are now. We're going to drive the ute as far as we can down this fire trail. Then we unload the gear. Then we drive the ute back to here, and put it over behind those trees. We want as much distance between us and it as possible.

'So then we walk back along the trail to the gear. If we muscle it, we can carry all the gear between the two of us, so we don't have to do any backtracking.

'We'll follow this track along the creek for, let me see, it's about fourteen Ks. That'll be quite a slog. It should be nice to camp here, on this sandy bit. In the morning we have to get into some pretty rough scrub. We have to get