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A Method Actor's Guide to Jekyll and Hyde

Written by Kevin MacNeill

Published by Polygon

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A Method Actor's Guide to Jekyll and Hyde

~A~ Novel

Kevin MacNeil

Polygon

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‘Everything is true; only the opposite is true, too; you must believe both equally or be damned.’

Robert Louis Stevenson

PART ONE

The Unbearable Likeness of Being



I'm in two minds. I peer through the indifferent window and scrutinise the smudgy, almost picturesque Edinburgh skyline. I overlook my reflection, it makes me feel less self-conscious but more self-aware. The brightish grey midday sky could go either way. Why not err on the side of optimism? That holiday must have changed my outlook. I'm seeing blue skies where there aren't any. Funny thing about holidays, the skies seem to get brighter, the world more tolerable.

Decision made, I put aside the thin waterproof jacket and toss my cycling helmet on to the couch, opt instead for a white and black sweatshirt and that cool black and white beanie hat I got in Rome. Touch of Rome equals touch of style. The old fave shoes, though, the soft-soled cleated ones that clip into the pedals but don't make you walk like you have two planks glued to your shoes.

I feel wonderful today, got that devilish streak of omniscience about me. I can do anything.

Must've been the change of scenery. Oh, I can make a joke about that at rehearsals. Change of scenery. They probably still don't have the scenery and props ready. Well, to quote my tattoo, 'Lift your bike out into the open day. Ride forth.'

If my current state of mind had a tattoo it would read, 'Come at me, world, I'm ready for you.'

I clip the shoes into the pedals of my single-speed fixed-gear bike and set off into the growling traffic. No changeable gears.

How can you cycle around Edinburgh (built, like Rome, on seven hills) when you have no gears? I have surplus. All my gears are in my legs, like all my characters are in my mind. I contain multitudes.

A mild fog begins to descend and I realise I've left my lights at home. I must've been using them on the road-bike – my superfast racing bike – before I left for Rome. I pump my legs up and down on the pedals, trying to find my rhythm, or as cyclists call it, *cadence*, all the while deep-breathing the typical old reek that I love and hate – greenness and exhaust fumes and breweries. The first few dozen turns of the legs, up the street – dodging negligent cars and lemming-wannabe pedestrians – are always weirdly tough and just when your heart and legs and mind find rhythm, the first traffic lights sail towards you. Red. Every time.

Today I'm unclipping my left shoe in anticipation of red when I realise the lights are green. Green like hope. A good omen. I reclip and shoot on, legs working hard, through the junction. Somebody over there beeps their horn swift as urgency, but that's the impertinence of drivers for you. I'm the one who's saving the planet, mate. I'm the one with the tree-trunk thighs. I'm the one with the resting pulse of 40, the enormous heart. So go learn what you're doing to the planet. Kids, or *their* kids, will probably grow up to build time machines *just* to come back and torture us for wasting their world. Serve us right.

I'm feeling immortal, so it's all good.

I hope I can still remember my lines. Mind you, Mac – the playwright – is only going to keep changing them anyway. Don't know whether I like him or hate him. There's something wrong with him. Bloody writers. Their heads aren't screwed on right.

I haven't seen the others since we had to take a semi-welcome break due to financial complications.The production was running out of cash; a funding application they'd been depending on 'tragically achieved but half its financial ambition'. Paul 'the Jewel' Blinkbonny, our pathetic semi-flamboyant director, wept a few tears and almost realistic they were, too.

I didn't think about my fellow actors all that much in Rome. Except Juliette. I should have asked her to come with me. Leaving without telling anyone except her felt rebellious and Bohemian. Sometimes you need a change, you just can't help yourself.

As I'm cycling the five miles to Theatre Lothian in the city centre, I lose myself to The Flow, the poetic motion of traffic all in accordance with itself, like destiny made manifest. We're all moving together, and it makes us feel like we belong together in this now, this *us*. Yep, I'm fizzing inside with an easy adrenaline. I can do *anything*. It's going to be a good day. I'll remember my lines. I had some ideas and maybe Mac'll take some of my suggestions and run with them. He can run as far as he likes, long as he doesn't come back. Ha ha. I might give him that one, if only to see him crack half a smile. No, he wouldn't laugh. I don't think I do like him.

Edinburgh. Even when she's ugly she's beautiful. Riding here, I reflect mindlessly on how this city's a dizzy amalgam of bored self-hating graffiti-splattered council houses and self-important bespoke-logo'd administrative hubs. I cycle on and the air itself buoys me along. I belong to the air and light, not the ridiculous fake world of commerce and routine and real jobs and lower and upper-class thugs. I am a free spirit, I am an artiste and I am invincible.

I keep my breathing regular, I let my legs push the never-ending gorgeous grotesque city behind me, that hotbed of genius and sleaze. Auld Reekie. Dùn Èideann.

I'm so at one with things I could probably close my eyes and get to Theatre Lothian just as easily. I ride along pedalling and breathing pedalling and breathing pedalling and breathing and ideas ride along within me at their own cadence, on their own thoughtwaves . . . The phrase 'Living in Edinburgh' comes randomly to mind. I wonder about life, what it means to be alive. I wonder about Edinburgh, this physical construct that becomes a spiritual part of you. I wonder about how I came to be here, in this life, where I am part of Edinburgh though it is bigger than me and I am bigger than it.

After drama college – and all the real-life drama that led up to it – I decided Edinburgh would be a wicked place to settle. Fair foul city-sized village of bustling summers and introspective autumns, backdrop to the world's largest arts festival and all its anticipated serendipities. Home to a national parish council, an almost powerful parliament indolently bustling with her irreconcilable flow of accurate rumours and unreliable press releases. Provocative, conservative Auld Reekie. The tiny capital of our proud-to-be-humble and fighting-to-be-fought-for nation that isn't a nation, where our new Old Testament God has cursed us with a fear of failure and blessed us with a fear of success. Where Highlander and Lowlander alike can agree to disagree on this and that because everything is contradiction and it is precariousness itself that holds things together.

Edinburgh.

An awful good place to be an actor.

Since I spend most of my time learning lines, or writing lines – I have pretentions in that area, too – I'm often alone. Even though I am beginning to despise writers, I went through a phase in my early teens when I wanted to write a book about loveliness. Yes, the world's very loveliness. But the world sooner rather than later is a sour-hearted place. The rapes and childbeatings and

bullyings and murders and human traffickings and innumerable injustices you read about every day are not lovely, they're inescapably real.

As I cycle, memories from real life pass me like cars. There goes a scruffy old Reliant Robin sputtering along, trundling towards a slow corner, putting me in mind of my agent, Dickie Clovenstone.

With the bad comes the good; I always manage to win through. I've been awarded the lead role – that is, lead role*s* – in a new stage version of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Even Dickie – that two-faced old failed playboy, arthritic, asthmatic and alcoholic – couldn't conceal his shock.

'Well, boy, I'm delighted! Oh, I'm thrilled to bits!' He moved through his fug of cigarette smoke towards me, arms crucified. His eyes, normally dead in their spectacles like damaged headlights, registered real shock and pseudo-delight. An actor can always read another person's eyes. He wrapped me in an own-brand-whisky-and-Old-Spice-soaked hug that made me flinch for buried reasons. 'First big job – and it's a belter!'

Well, it is and it isn't. I want – I need – to be famous. Wealthy. Admired. Hell, *loved*.

Jekyll & Hyde, as Mac has presumptuously called it, is really quite a low-budget play, but, hey, it might be good. A few more weeks of rehearsal in Edinburgh then off on tour: Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Stornoway, Brighton, London. As long as I get a fee and something *actual* to put on my CV I don't care how big or small their budget is. The important fact is, they *want* me. It feels right – to be needed, I mean.

The audition was easy for the chancer I am. Truth is, I went to dozens of schools but I never had much schooling. I left my final secondary school with a pass in English, an unwarranted smirk and a pocketful of borrowed money.

A beige Volkswagen Jetta drifts past at I'd guess a steady 29 mph. It has a bumper sticker that says 'A Good Bumper Sticker Makes Me Feel Like I'm Done Thinking for the Day'. Reminds me of The Shrivel.

When I left school, I had real dreams, though cynicism and distrust are common in foster children, according to The Shrivel (my name for my shrink). He also told me that a quarter of foster children are homeless within a year of leaving home.

'Well,' I said, 'I've been homeless *all my life*. How could I leave home when I never had one?'

He gave a patronising cough. 'Now, don't, don't exaggerate. You had, you had . . . seventeen homes.' He did an involuntary double-take which made me splutter with laughter. '*Seventeen*?'

'That's what I said. I never had *one*.'

'I'm not, I'm not sure you understand the seriousness of the –'

'No, man. It's you that doesn't see it. I'm gonna be famous. I'm the guy that's gonna redefine what famous even *means*.'

For maybe half a minute The Shrivel gazed at me without speaking. At last his eyes blinked and they seemed to say, *I believe you, almost*.

'Well, it's, it's good to have ambition,' he conceded.

I must send him a flyer. *Jekyll & Hyde* – the old bastard'll be overjoyed for me. Give himself credit for it too, no doubt, but that's okay, no biggie. He only meant well, when he meant anything.

Out the corner of my eye, something shadowy as a bat's wing startles me. A BMW rocketing past. Its stupid black polished length flits fast over my reflection, like it's trying to smack my elbow. Yeah, that's okay, if you hit me it would only be me who got killed and you who got away with it. Tosser. Like something Whitekirk would drive.

My college days also played out in Edinburgh. To get into college, I wallpapered the truth. Well, I lied like my life depended on it. How else does someone like me get to do Acting and Performance thankyouverymuch?

Whitekirk, the college Head of Drama, soon discovered I had lied. An ominously neutral letter summoned me to his office. Godfrey Whitekirk was an overweight headmasterish fiftysomething with milky hair that reminded me of a Mr Whippy ice-cream. He sat rigid behind an oak desk, his face turning crimson, his eyes burning malevolence at me. You didn't need to be an actor to read the curses in those eyes.

Impassive, I held his gaze.

The long silence he extended was supposed to unnerve me (hadn't he himself taught that particular class?) Somewhere outside, a bird gave a sweet chirrupy chortle. A twinge of joy in the ecstasy of this drama, this real-life tension with unwritten repercussions. I felt wild with hidden confidence.

'*Sit. Down.*'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.' I kept my face blank.

'*You.*' He shook his head. '*You. Lied. To. Me.*' His breathing was laboured. Heart attack within a decade, I'd say.

'Sir?' Sir, being quite rare nowadays, is a more marvellous ingratiator than ever. I widened my eyes in respect. Play it right.

'*Your qualifications.*'

'Ah . . .' I slumped, blinked back an imaginary tear. I took a deep breath, bent back a fingernail till it hurt bad, swallowed the wince and wept a few pained tears. 'This day . . . this day had to come . . .'

'Did you *really* think you'd get away with it? Didn't you think we'd have a system in place to, to *root out this sort of thing*? Heavens, boy, don't you think every Tom, Dick and Debbie Harry would be in college if it was that easy?'

I kept a straight face. He was famous among students for remixing the cliché. 'Sir, no, sir.'

'And to think *I believed you*. I interviewed you right here in this office. This is serious, very serious. What you've done is actually *illegal* . . . Do you have anything to say for yourself?'

'Sir . . .' Measure the pause. Deflate body further, cast eyes to the floor. Blink. Blink back meek tears. 'No, sir.'

'*No?*'

I glanced up, puppy-eyed. His face bulged, a talking pumpkin. He gripped the desk, on the verge of getting to his feet.

Keep cool. This is working.

Now speak in a quiet, honest manner. 'Well, sir, you see, I was desperate – *desperate* – to get into drama school. *This* school. I told you I was adopted and had a tough upbringing – I mean, *really* tough. Uh, and when I said that my house burned down and my exam certificate was incinerated and that the Scottish Qualification Authority . . . Sir?'

'*You're nothing but a liar!*'

I wondered if a blood vessel might burst and spread a little red inkstain over the white of his eye.

I conceded, 'There, uh, there *was* no fire.'

'*You sat there –? You sat there and sold me a grizzly bear-faced packet of lies?* Even – even said *that your parents had died in that fire*. Oh, I had thought twice about calling the police, but not now.' He picked up the phone receiver with his left hand and with his other stabbed a fat finger at the key pad. 'I'll have your nuts for garters, boy.'

'Well –'

'Well what? Oh, there's no talking me round! You sat – you *cried* in my office! *You . . . deceitful . . . little . . . toe-rug.*'

'Well, you're right, sir, I did cry.' (I had actually bent my entire ring-fingernail right back, every bit as excruciating as it

sounds.) 'I told you about the fire in every detail. About my birth parents – my mother's tough love, my father's belief that a child should only eat what it has seen in cartoon form in an advert on telly, I told you about how important drama was in my life and how playing *Hamlet* in a school production literally saved my life.'

Whitekirk gave a grunt-and-nod. The phone receiver hovered in his hand.

'And I also told you about how my kitten – remember fluffy wee Rosencrantz? – perished in the fire. How my parents were too – ah, *dismissive* – of the arts to come and see me that night, the highlight of my life, portraying *Hamlet*. And how when my mother's discarded and, and *drunken* cigarette torched the place that night and –'

'Yes?'

'Sir, you – if I may be so bold – more or less shed a tear with me that day.'

Silence.

'Sir, *I convinced you*.'

The silence deepened and shifted.

'Sir, *I'm. A good. Actor*.' I sent a fierce pleading blazing through my eyes.

Oh, damn it, I was good.

In slow motion, the phone receiver returned to its cradle.

'Sir, I have a talent. I beg of you to let me develop it. If I can act well enough to persuade you – *you, sir* – does that not make me worthy of a place on this course?'

Ha!

I grin to think about it now, hurtling through the Edinburgh traffic, swinging out past a 26 bus that's painted zebra style for somebody-craving-money reasons. Odd world. I up my tempo; the mist can't harm The Flow.

Not everything at college was quite so easy. During my three years I had to work about 200 per cent harder than the others; Whitekirk had instructed the lecturers to keep a suspicious eye trained on me. I knew that if I stepped out of line – or, rather, if I got caught – I'd be kicked off the course faster than you could say Konstantin Sergejevitch Stanislavski.

Some classes were useful, most were pretentious. The warm-up exercises for body and voice were a weird torture. They should have just made us all go out for a bike ride, shouting at occasional motorists.

I boost my cadence again as nostalgia's adrenaline revs within me. The wet mist is a cold sweat. Cleansing, though, in its own way. Odd, how things are, when you really look at them, also what they're not.

At the beginning we studied in playful earnest. Voice and speech, singing, body awareness, phonetics, dance, stage combat, improv, textual analysis and so on.

Under my beanie hat, lecturers' voices rise above the rumbling and gurning of traffic.

'To play a drunk, one must be as a drunk trying to act sober.'

'To die well one must struggle for life.'

'Fully to be something is to embrace its opposite.'

'Not acting but reacting.'

'Not reacting but being.'

'Aye being where extremes meet.'

Most of the students hid their insecurities behind masks of arrogance, self-centredness and vanity; I didn't much like that, as I was doing the same thing myself. Pub culture was a bit embarrassing as alcohol tended to increase my fellow students' me-me-me-ness, their potential for histrionics, their (already clamorous) volume level.

Everyone can't be the most important person in the room.

These attitudes lead to outrageous drunken behavours which could only be tolerated in certain pubs and given that *we* often felt we'd had too much of ourselves, it's no wonder we never felt welcome enough in one place to make it our regular. Acting students.We weren't friends, we were people bonded together by other people's masks, other people's lies.

Some students who, as I did, stayed in halls of residence, invented a game they called 'Roommate Roulette', which was a kind of 'Spin the Bottle' with roomkeys, nightclub flyers and condoms. You could end up with someone you didn't get along with, maybe someone of the same sex; no one seemed to mind. After all, these were zany (read: vain) drama students who were living out colourful scenes for their future biographers. I spray-painted *Self-Mythologisers 'R' Us* on a bedsheet and hung it from the railings outside one particularly hedonistic student house. But it was all in the name of art. The delicate art of *bullshit-and-we-know-it*.

Not that I'm one – not that I'm one to talk. There was this night I figured the hell with it and took a blind leap off the teetotal wagon and into some dark, peat-reeking whisky ditch. No one ever mentioned to me the alcoholic night, the night that thirsted for something *different*, the night that drank itself stupid on its own oblivion and spent the following day on its knees spewing steadily darkening bile into the toilet. It was unsettling and weird to survive a night that only existed in an image or two.

Like those girls in, *Burke and Hare*, was it? Half-undressed in flash clothes. Performing bored gyrations on the dance floor, their bodies strobed by a bombed rainbow of disco lights. Their honed innocence said *Look at me* and my feigned worldliness replied *I won't look at you closely, for you are frost in the heart and fire in the blood. I don't give in to temptations like that. I control my*

emotions. I am an ac-tor. Then blackness and the feeling that something had happened . . .

The toilet – not pristine – squatted there the following day, silently affirming reality and hinting at guilts. I thought I'd been in a fight with someone. There was a girl, a guy . . . A torrent of shame in my stomach erupted and burst its acid way through my mouth in a fierce lumpy jet.

The night that didn't exist and the day that reeked of death are both gone now, perhaps secreted in some part of the judgemental mind. Sooner or later I decided that the world had moved on and I should too. I vowed never to drink again, satisfied all the same that if I had done or said something wrong good-and-proper I'd have heard of it by now. And I stuck to my vow, more or less.

Yes, no, college – see, I was breaking off from the main group. I didn't like drink for what it had done to me, but I enjoyed pub culture, I liked the atmosphere that groups of near-random people create when officially relaxing.

Up London Road now, moving faster, cars and buses and taxis and lorries whooshing and honking with impatience. On a bike you're both tortoise and hare as the moment demands. I swerve between two 'Chelsea tractors', my right shoulder clipping the wing mirror of one; it beeps at me twice, but I flash the guy a manual insult then shrug the incident off. My inner life is more interesting. Memories are reanimating my mind. This mist is awesome, like the city is flooding with dry ice.

A huge multicoloured dairy truck barges past, noisy, swift, emboldened by its own momentum.

One of our more flamboyant lecturers, Fenella Prestonpans, dress size 22 if she was a day, used to differentiate between us 'artistes' and 'mice'. I can still picture her as she earthquaked

into the room, resplendent in a cake-splattered tent, hairy green tights and improbable red ballet shoes, like Dorothy gone wrong. 'All right, everyone, find a space,' she'd bellow. 'And listen the bloody heck up. There are those who live their lives not under the spotlight but under little selfish private reading lights or in front of the garish pig-ignorant light of a TV screen. To some extent these are the ordinaries, the nonentities. They are mice.They have sweet flip all *character*. They are the masses. But without them, you would not have an acting career – as I hope some of you will. *You are not the mice.* You are the public people. The stars. The *heroes*, if you will. The *loud* people. The *characters*. Bright – brash – noisy – colourful – unapologetic. So. Listen.

'You. Must live. Your lives. In a very. Big. Way.'

This idea appealed to me. Ambition firestormed my mind. I was mad with freedom. So I had a demented brainwave. I turned my life into a series of scenes and plays.

I took to going to pubs *in character*. Thus, I could have fun *and* hone my acting skills at the same time. In my own mind I was making myself The One Most Likely to Become Famous.

I would liberate clothing, temporary hair dyes, wigs and props from the 'locked' Costume & Scenery department and spend a weekend learning as much from 'real' life as I'd learned during the past month's 'how to be fake' classes. A besuited version of me – 'Olly', Eton old-boy, dealer in the City, Porsche Cayman S and homes in Edinburgh, London and New York – would shark the classier wine bars, mooching drinks off slim sleek-haired businesswomen who had moneyed a decade or so off their age. Five o'clock on Friday would see 'Jimmy the joiner' dumping his toolbag (actually filled with cutlery) in a grimy no-frills bar off Leith Walk, relaxing with a contented sigh into his thirsty drink, cursing his team's misfortunes. Camper

than a jamboree, 'Leslie Love' would flounce into Each Way Bette's demanding 'something long and hard, sweetie, and get me a drink while you're at it'. I went to student unions as a Goth, an emo, a raver, a 'new lad'. Must've met hundreds of people I never saw again – or rather, they never saw 'me' again. Hundreds. And I learned so damn *much*.

I assimilated all the tricks. Stolen car-brand keyrings, aftershave samples from chemists, coloured contact lenses, accessorisation, the diverse wonders of hairstyling. And above all – using one's eyes. That's what they're for. Eyes are an actor's greatest asset.

I became in all things a free actor in the world.

But even I could see that things were rotten in the land of tasty pastries and Hans Christian. An old niggle was resurfacing . . .

My legs arced the bike and I flew past a zigzagging fat man on a mountain bike. I skimmed him close enough to give him a valuable-lesson wobble.

I brought it up with The Shrivel, how difficult it was to be myself. I'd been coming to his clinically lit 'Beige Furniture and Regulation Big Green Plant'-style office in the New Town – the posh part of Edinburgh – for some time now. It was via the NHS, but true to my make-believe nature, I'd blagged myself a private psychiatrist with a public reputation. The Shrivel was a curious man, although quite beige himself in some ways. His favourite infuriating habit was scribbling notes – dividing his attention – at random times during our appointments. Worse, he could even do this while *he* was talking. I got over my annoyance by pretending he was drawing sketches of Freud taking him and his mother to bed. He wore a precise goatee beard which looked fake and annoying tiny rectangular glasses that he would drive into his forehead when he wasn't scratching at his notebook. He was overweight, sweaty and restless.

Our first meeting was less than auspicious. A large white desk-fan circled upon itself, sluggish with boredom. 'You've had a . . . challenging upbringing. Most people could . . . could hardly imagine how that would make a person feel about themselves. Hmm?' His voice was gentle and artificial the way a little girl's is when she's talking to her dolls.

'You know, I feel like that mental patient whose shrivel, I mean shrink – psychiatrist – fell into a deep pond at the hospital and started drowning. So the patient jumped in and saved the doctor's life.'

Pause here for effect, and to register his professionally controlled confusion. His eyes said, *Has he finished? What does he mean?*

After a while, I resumed. 'And so they said to the patient, "There's good news and bad. You saved your doctor's life, and for that we recognise you have come to learn the difference between right and wrong. In fact, we're going to release you.

"But you'll be sad to hear that the doctor probably went into the pond deliberately, because he was later found in the bathroom with a noose around his neck.

"Hell no," says the patient. "I left him hanging there to dry."'

The Shrivel looked hurt – he blanched – and I retracted more or less straightaway. 'Hey, no, no, man – I was kidding. Kidding. Sense of humour, man. It's all good. Just testing the water. Seems *icy*. Chill, Sigmund.'

The rest of that appointment zipped past in a bland blur. He asked me questions, I adopted a persona a couple or three removes from myself and gave polite, stilted answers. His tiny rectangular specs could see he wasn't getting anywhere with me. Scribble scribble. 'Okay. Early days. It would make me happy if, if you could find some time to fill out this short form for me for next time, all right? Is that, is that okay, hmm? What I think, I think is,

even this early on, is, is, and it's likely, something has, has consolidated your own sense of defensiveness, of life itself as, as shadowy, haunted by, by forces of, of, well, not evil, but sinister, hmm . . .?'

The buggering hell was he on about? Filling in the form was easy enough. I didn't know a lot of the factual information – for the question 'How would you describe your upbringing?' I just wrote 'Upbringing *singular*?' and likewise 'How would you describe your relationship with your parents?' 'Which ones?'

This part was easier: 'List the things you like.'

Fame, stage and screen stuff, drama, cycling, wild animals, reading and watching and maybe writing plays, walking, freedom, containing multitudes, falling asleep but only when I'm very tired otherwise I loathe it, the Scottish sense of humour, the cool sad song of the wood pigeon, doing stuff that's a bit offbeat, listening to the radio very late at night/very early in the morning, black, white, hearing a really good joke for the first time, random acts of art, the electric guitar, the acoustic guitar, Christian aliens riding dinosaurs bareback.

'List the things you don't like.'

Grrr. Mushrooms (evil! evil! – the spawn of Satan), violence, violent peace activists, arrogance, false modesty, answering the phone, drivers who don't think cyclists exist, death, not knowing if you know that person well enough to say hello far less speak to them, guilt, hearing my own heartbeat, injustice, people who are too controlling, blandness, people who tell lies. Filling in forms. Hypocrisy. People who doodle sketches of themselves going to bed with Freud's mother.

I was surprised that the list of things I don't like was shorter than the list of things I do. That wasn't true to character. But who among us is?

The reason I wanted to be an actor – not so much according to The Shrivel as according to what I told The Shrivel – was I had no fixed identity. And if I couldn't be myself, I'd have to be somebody else. Anybody. Everybody.

Thus, drama college didn't so much make the man I am today as the men I'm not.

I come to, cycling along. The mist is dispersing. Weird, how the hypnotic rhythms of bike-riding lull you into such a state of relaxation you can cycle a mile or two and you can't even remember doing it. The steady rhythms of your feet on the pedals and the pedals on the chainring and the chainring on the chain and the chain on the sprocket and the sprocket on the hub and the hub on the wheel and the wheels on the street, the street that buzzes with other wheels will lull will lull will lull you into a daydream. I smile to myself. The Flow always looks after you. You and The Flow are one, not two. *I lose myself* in cycling. I don't know why that should be such a good thing, but it is. Physical exercise makes a tangible difference to the heart's properties.

The mist's all but lifted now – already – strange; it has shrunk away to near-nothing, like breath on a windowpane. Cars, buses, taxis, lorries – the traffic has duplicated itself a few times over, now we're nearer the stone and glass heart of the city.

I pedal faster because I can see further and because my pumped-up heart muscle and the fluidity of the moment and the visual and tactile grace of my bike demand it. I wonder if I look as confident and as part-of-the-moment as I feel. I pity pedestrians, who have to go about the day heavy and slow. I'm at my most alive when riding The Flow or when I'm being someone else under the lights, before the audience. That's the funny thing about life –

Blackness.

?

Swifter than shock: aggressive blackness. A screech of dark-walloping-metallic-flying-twisting-concrete blackness. A groan. Mine.

Broken.

Wrong.

Floaty, no body.

Dead?

To die well one must struggle for life.

But.

Urrggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Well, Godbastarddamnit.

Fading.

Noise.

Okay.

Take it in.

I open my eyes. *Try* to. Traffic sounds rumble like the sea in some inner distance. Also there is a jabby kind of blaring, an insistent something, like a parent. Someone else's. A shuddering inside. I wish everything would leave me alone. So tired.

Why can't my eyes ope– ah. Hang on. That's it, raise the curtain. My mind throbs with dull noises and distorted light. I weigh nothing. Channels of noise and light are passing through me. I can't link them with anything. I dimly wonder if I'm still me or if the blackness has broken my head too much. Where is my head? I am numb. I know enough to know this is some kind of Upheaval, one way or the other.

I wonder if I'm fine or if I'm damaged for ever. I wonder if I'm going to die. And at the same time – like a burst of pain – *already? No!* There is a play, is there not? And there is fame and

money. The world cannot change me. The world cannot change me like this. The world cannot change me like this before I have changed *it*.

My skull hurts.

This is good, maybe.

Up there, above my left eye.

A pain that is big *and* sharp at once. How would you picture that? Like a cloud with a rocketship inside it. A mist with a swift bike.

Wait – good? How?

Pain means I am alive. Because one thing you can say about pain, pain is a proof of life. Yes, a little pain never hurt anyone. The noises and lights and images are moving and I'll need to sort them out, but I know I'm still a part of – of that which has *no* resting place.

The dizzying light slows a little. I can't see much. White, is all. A big ugly circle – wait, that's a man's head. Face. A bald face with. No, a bald head and a face with a moustache. Well, the rest of the stuff must be sky. Hello, sky. Thank you. Sort of. Hang on.

Almost before I think it, I decide that if I'm alive and have a body I'm ready to move. I try to sit, I push forward – my mind spins like a sick fairground – someone's hand is at my back (good, I have, I mean, I can feel a back, my back), their hand supports me, the bald man's hand I think helps me to a nearly sitting position.

Oooh. This is not the way to be alive. Everything spins.

The disjointed feeling of *blood*. A part of me that should be inside me is outside of me. I feel funny. Dizzy and weak, like joy. No, not joy. I bring my left hand from nowhere up to my head. Interesting, I have a left arm. My left arm works. Blood. It is good to find bits that are working. The blood from a big

throb-throb-throb gash in my forehead trickles warm then cold down the side of my face. What day is it today? Ah, the blood is warm, my face is cold. I goosebump. I want to be hugged up in a huge blanket. Where's my mammy? Oh, I never had one. Did I? The blood that's still inside my veins tingles in dazed excitement. Oh boy, normally I can do things much better than this. What's my name, though? Wait, is someone else asking me that? Who said what day is it?

My head sways, lolls a circle or two. The world is wrong, puke-y, too fast.

Breathing is bad. No, breathing is good. My breathing is bad. Blood outside is bad. Um – having movement is good. Or bad? Being able to move must be good, like how I'd forgotten I had a left arm till I moved it. What other bits do I have? Maybe they will all come alive when I remember them and move them.

A small crowd has gathered round. Some of them closer than others. Some of them talking as if nothing has happened. They should get the hell away.

Where's my blanket?

I don't have a blanket. I was a foster child.

I do and don't want people looking at me. I like it when people look at me. But I'm not me. I'm better than this. Cleverer.

Must look stupid sitting here. Oh, I could die of embarrass – no, wait. Shut up. Don't know my own name. I *am* stupid. Try to make things make sense. Make sense of things. Right. That noise, say, coming from near the pavement, that is words, that is a man making words. No moustache. A man in a green costume. Dark hair. I think he's asking me my name. I can't tell him what I don't know.

On the other side, Bald Moustache is looking at me like I am a ghost. Stupid man. I'm not a ghost, I'm a stupid man.

Another noise. 'Uh-w-wh-wh–.' Ooh, that's exciting – that sound came from me. Ah, yes, I know: I'm trying to ask if my bike is okay.

All that is coming out of me is blood and nonsense.

And the green man has become two green men. They are apologising to me, I don't know why. Now they are moving me, which means I am getting fixed. They're lifting me. How can they do that? Oh, yeah, I don't weigh anything. My head spins like the wheel of a bike when it isn't broken. My head therefore is not broken.

Take me away, green men, I hope you will drive safely. I hope you will fix my bike. You better have my bike somewhere in this fancy UFO van, flashing with lights, you are putting me into, upside down on my back. I think – yes – my bike is green. You will like it. It will match you. Make sure the wheels are round.

Goodbye everyone gathered here who isn't green, thanks for coming to the show.

Sorry I couldn't remember my own name.

A regular high-pitched *beep . . . beep* punctuates the thick antiseptic air. Pain. *Bad* pain. Every nerve end shrill with pain. My whole body is a fingernail bent back. Can't live like –

Ah, what's that? That feels good. Happy numbness swimming in my veins.

Imagine.

Ah, weird bliss.

What if I just went out into the world as myself and sat at a table outside a pleasant café with a cappuccino in front of me and a pair of sunglasses flattering my eyes and a book draped across my lap and a relaxed and welcoming expression on my face?

And what if I watched and waited. Watched the cobbled street particular to this part of the universe, the girls swaying past, their smiles highlighting unknown conversations and the muted sun glinting off tabletops and shop windows in a warm humble sparkle. *Life*.

And what if I waited for a girl to come along, and a girl came along and she pointed a glistening finger at a chair and said, 'D'you mind if I –?'

I'd make my face and voice suave and say, 'Be my guest.'

And already I would have lost because in giving my face a sophisticated expression and my voice some kind of urbane timbre, I would have stopped being myself.

Then, wow.

That first time the *Jekyll & Hyde* cast came together was the first time I set eyes on her, and my idea of loveliness was born anew. Juliette was like Edinburgh, a palpable mirage. And she was so nice to me. It felt amazing for someone so beautiful to treat me like a person worthy of her attention, much less an equal. Also present, though less so, were my fellow cast members, the director, the stage manager.

Juliette and I had to act a scene from a play as a warm-up exercise.

But a scene from a different play, a play of the imagination, a hallucination, came to life in my mind as I looked at this elegant young