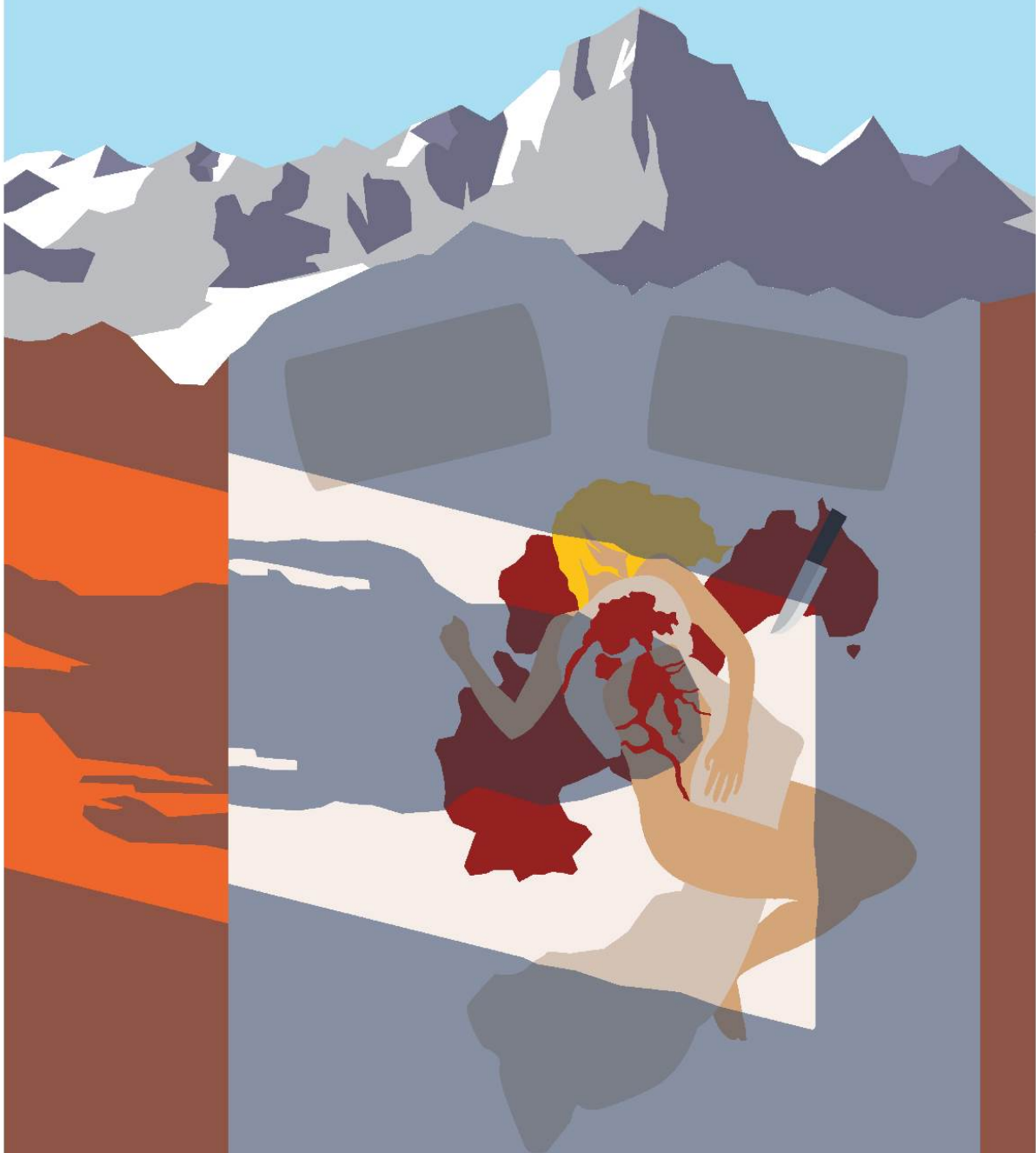


# HOUSE RULES



JAMES MENGEL

# House Rules

by

James Mengel

Illustration by Dario Ackermann

To my good friend Winfried who introduced me to the  
wonderful world of Couchsurfing.

©2015

# Chapter 1

Sometimes I wonder why I do the crazy things I do.

I mean like now, at 6 o'clock on a Monday morning and feeling like shit, why am I driving to the South Brisbane railway station to pick up a complete stranger when I could be home in bed, recovering from a night of vodka-fuelled debauchery?

Actually I didn't expect my guest to be there so early; his plane was supposed to land at 5.30. I figured that after waiting for his luggage, going through customs and getting the Airtrain, he wouldn't get to South Brisbane till 7. Obviously his plane had got in early, he'd sailed through customs, which rarely happens, and got the 5.30 Airtrain.

Why the hell did I tell him to ring me and wait for me to pick him up? He could have got a taxi to my place. Or walked.

You idiot, Joe! You're far too generous a host.

I must explain...

I'm a member of an Internet community called Couchsurfing that has millions of members worldwide. It's a kind of social club where you offer your couch or spare bed to other members for no charge. It's well organised and strictly controlled: everyone has a profile page with photos and information about themselves and members can check you out as a host or guest through references that people have written about you.

Couchsurfing is more than free accommodation though: it's a way of making friends and contacts around the world with people of all ages who share your passion for travelling. I have been doing it now for five years and have had more than 150 guests, most of whom have been great. In fact, some have become close friends whom I visit when I travel overseas myself.

Of course you can choose to accept or reject people who request your couch. I usually only take Europeans - especially Germans and French - as European culture interests me the most. I also get a chance to practice and improve my first-year university German and French, which was one of the main reasons I joined up.

My friends think I'm crazy. 'How can you share your house with a total stranger, give them a key and free access to your personal possessions, and allow them to infringe upon your privacy?'

But I don't see it that way. To me couch surfers aren't strangers; they share my love of adventure, investigating other cultures and making new friends. They're like a family, and who wouldn't offer a family member a free bed? All right, I wouldn't offer my lazy, parasitic brother a free bed but he's an exception.

My latest guest is a 23 year-old German guy called Nikola (we'll have to talk about changing the name) who wants to stay at least a week. He wrote a great letter and seemed to have a friendly, mature personality. Being new to Couchsurfing he has no references, so I'm taking a bit of a risk, but members have got to start somewhere, otherwise no one would ever be hosted.

I explained to Nikola that I only host people for five days and after that they have to pay a fee of \$15 per day, which is pretty reasonable and cheaper than any hostel. This is to discourage the freeloaders, of which there are many, who are just after free accommodation. I figure that Brisbane, like most large cities of the world, only has enough attractions for three or four days. I start to get suspicious if people want to stay longer. I once had a guy who found a job then expected to stay for six weeks at no charge. Sorry pal, that ain't Couchsurfing.

Nikola happily agreed to my terms and we locked in his arrival date, but left his departure date open.

As I pulled up in front of the station I could see him immediately. He was the epitome of the Aryan stereotype: tall, muscular, blond and good looking. Hitler would have had an orgasm. He saw me and waved, flashing a broad smile across his tanned and handsome face. I jumped out of the car and opened the boot as he approached. I could see that he was blue-eyed as well. Surprise, surprise.

'Hey Nikola! *Wie geht's?*' I spoke in German to put him at his ease.

'*Guten Morgen, Joel!*' he replied, removing his backpack that was the size and probably the weight of a small refrigerator.

'Put your bag in the boot,' I said.

With impressive ease and enormous biceps bulging through his Bayern München T-shirt he swung the backpack into the boot as if it were empty.

'You've got a lot of gear,' I said, closing the boot. 'Are you planning to stay a year?'

'I'm going to the South Island of New Zealand after Australia so I've brought a lot of warm clothes.'

'I see. Well, hop in.'

He immediately went round to the right front seat of the car but stopped when he saw the steering wheel.

'Oops,' he said in embarrassment, doubling back and getting into the passenger seat. 'I forgot that the steering wheel is on the right side in Australian cars.'

'Don't worry, it's a common mistake,' I smiled, 'all Europeans make it.' I always found this steering-wheel mix-up to be a good icebreaker.

As we started off on the 10-minute drive to my apartment, the sun had well and truly risen and Brisbane was living up to its reputation as capital of the Sunshine State. I took a route through the back streets that were lined by tall and shady jacaranda trees, brought into Brisbane 150 ago from South America and now ubiquitous throughout the suburbs. Being the end of October their blooms had fallen, leaving a beautiful lilac carpet on the ground below. It was an impressive sight that did not go unnoticed by my new guest.

‘Brisbane is nice,’ he effused. ‘I really like what I’ve seen so far.’

‘Well, I like living here,’ I replied, ‘though I’d rather be living in Germany.’ It was true. I liked Australia, but in my heart I was European.

‘We could always swap houses,’ Nikola joked. He then thanked me for picking him up so early.

‘My pleasure,’ I lied. ‘It’s all part of the service.’ Indeed I usually pick up all my guests and deposit them wherever they wanted to go at the end of their stay. It’s something I think all hosts should do.

After a pause he said, ‘Joe, do you mind if I say *du* to you?’

In German as in most other European languages there are two words for you, depending on the level of politeness you want to express. For a friend or child you use *du*, for strangers, officials and older people you use *Sie*.

‘Please say *du*. I hate people calling me *Sie*. I’m not ready for the old peoples’ home yet!’

He laughed, but I didn’t. Being one year away from the big four-o, I was becoming sensitive about my age.

‘Your name *is* Nikola, right?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s an unusual name for a German.’

‘It’s French actually. My mother is Swiss, from the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Her father’s name was Nikola so she passed it on to me.’

‘I see. So your mother speaks French. *Donc, tu parles français aussi?*’ (So you speak French too?)

‘*Pas parfaitement, mais pas mal* (not perfectly, but not bad). I could speak it really well as a kid but stopped when I went to high school. French had an image problem. It was considered too gay.’ Other couchsurfers had told me that too. The poor French.

I returned to the subject of his name.

‘You realise that Nikola with a C is a girl’s name in Australia?’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. I think it might be less confusing if you called yourself Nick. Would you have a problem with that?’

‘Not at all. Nick sounds cool.’

Nick and I had something in common. I was given an unfortunate girly-sounding name too: Marion. My parents were great fans of Western film star John Wayne and that was his real given name. Dedicating me to their movie idol may have sounded like a good idea at the time but it condemned me to a childhood of schoolyard taunting and bullying. (I was universally known as Maid Marion.) It’s something I never forgave them for. I couldn’t wait to change my name when I moved out of home.

We chatted on. Nick was indeed a very nice young guy and I was glad to have accepted him and given him the option to stay on.

We arrived at my apartment and I parked outside since I was going to work in an hour or so. I unlocked the front door and ushered Nick inside.

‘Put your bag in the back room, Nick, but before you do, I’d be grateful if you took your shoes off and left them at the door.’ I was a bit of a stickler for cleanliness and always made sure my guests got the message right from the outset.

‘No problems. We do this in Germany too.’

After he’d done as requested I handed him a key, a map of the area, directions of how to get into town and the dreaded House Rules. This was a two-page list of instructions of how to behave *chez moi* — the usual boring but necessary things about keeping the kitchen clean, using the different garbage bins correctly, not wasting electricity, saving water and so on. I had written them in three different languages (English, French and German) to save myself giving the same speech every time a guest arrived. It was brilliant actually: I have never had the problems with my couch surfers that many other hosts experience because they know right from the start what is expected of them.

‘While you’re reading these,’ I said as I handed Nick the house rules, ‘can I make you a coffee or tea?’

‘A coffee would be great.’

‘How do you have it?’

‘White with two sugars. *Danke.*’

I left him and went into the kitchen to make him and myself a coffee. Five minutes later I came back with the coffees. He was just finishing off the house rules.

‘Joe, I have a question.’

‘Fire away.’

‘Do you mind if I don’t wear a shirt around the house? It’s winter in Germany and I want to enjoy the warmth here. Besides, I want to make my friends jealous when we Skype.’

I didn’t know if he was talking about them being jealous of the weather or of his physique.

‘I don’t care what you wear,’ I said. ‘*Mein Haus ist dein Haus*. You can wear nothing if you want; just don’t expect me to do the same.’

I actually did have a Swedish guy once who was a nudist. Scandinavians in general are far less inhibited about showing their bodies. This guy was just a bit more extreme. Atypically for Swedes he wasn’t very good-looking so his nudity wasn’t a pretty sight. Coupled with the fact that he had a piercing. And I don’t mean in his ear.

‘Why on earth did you get your dick pierced?’ I’d asked him, wincing at the thought.

‘Well I think it looks cool and it enhances the enjoyment of sex,’ he replied.

I didn’t agree with his first statement and seriously doubted the second.

‘There’s only one drawback,’ he added, ‘I have to sit down to pee otherwise I spray the walls.’

‘Too much information,’ was the only thing I could think of to say.

But back to Nick...

‘No,’ I reiterated, ‘feel free to wear what you like. Most of my guests in summer go *oben ohne* (topless). And that’s just the women.’

He laughed. He was starting to lose his German reserve.

‘Anyway, grab your coffee and come out to the courtyard. I want you to tell me all about yourself.’ I switched to English. ‘And I want to hear how good your English is.’

.....

We sat down at the table in the courtyard. Nick looked up dreamily at the cloudless blue sky, partly blocked by the red-flowered poinciana trees shading the courtyard from the neighbour’s backyard. A symphony of early morning birdcalls filled the air.

‘I can’t believe I’m sitting here on the other side of the world,’ he said in his lightly accented English. Germans as a rule don’t have many problems speaking English; Nick was no exception.

‘Two days ago I was in cold and rainy Germany and now I’m in paradise.’

‘Are you tired?’ I asked.

‘Not too bad,’ he replied. ‘I have had a stopover in Singapore and could get some sleep there.’

‘Oh, you had a stopover,’ I said, subtly correcting his grammar.

Germans have major problems with English verb tenses. They use the perfect tense (‘have had’) for everything in the past whereas we mainly just use the simple imperfect tense (‘had’). I took a mental note to work on this with him.

‘That makes a big difference,’ I continued. ‘Many of my guests suffer from jet lag the first few days. The best way to beat this is to stay awake till at least nine o’clock tonight. Drink lots of coffee and whatever you do, don’t have an afternoon nap.’

‘Okay, I’ll try not to.’

‘Now, *mein Freund*, tell me all about yourself. Where you live, your family, what your parents do and so on.’

‘Well, I live in a small willage outside Frankfurt called Kronberg.’

‘You mean village,’ I said, correcting his pronunciation.

This is another common problem with my German guests: v’s and w’s. They usually swap the two consonants. I often spend hours trying to get them to pronounce them correctly. Many don’t succeed.

‘Sorry, village’.

It still sounded like willage.

‘Brothers and sisters?’ I asked.

‘Two older brothers, one 28 and the other 25. The older one is a doctor and the other is studying medicine.’

‘What do your parents do?’

‘My father is a surgeon and my mother is a ...’ He paused, trying unsuccessfully to think of the English word. ‘*Physiotherapeutin*?’

‘Physiotherapist,’ I said. He nodded.

His parents were obviously raking in the Euros.

‘Are they still together?’



‘*Nein*. My father left my mother a few years ago for another woman. My aunt, actually. I have lived with my mother.’

This was no surprise. The majority of my German guests seem to have separated parents. I decided not to pursue Nick’s parents’ matrimonial situation, as interesting as it sounded. This could wait till later, when he was primed with alcohol.

‘You’re not following your parents’ profession then? Medicine, I mean - like your brothers.’

‘I started to. I have studied two years at the Heidelberg University then I realised it wasn’t for me. I decided to take some time out and see the world, and work out what I wanted to do with my life.’

‘Good idea,’ I said. I had made a similar career change at his age.

‘What about your interests and hobbies?’ I enquired.

‘Well I’m a gym junkie. I work out five days a week and really love it.’

I could tell that.

‘What are you going to do now? You won’t be able to work out like that any more.’

‘Maybe there is a gym near your place I could go to?’

There were several. I suggested a couple he could check out later.

‘But,’ I warned, ‘you must realise that they’re a lot more expensive here than in Germany.’ Like everything, apart from petrol.

‘I don’t care. I have enough money for important things like this.’ The money no doubt supplied by *Mutti* and *Vati*.

‘Any other interests?’ I asked.

‘Yes. I do magic tricks and I love salsa dancing. I have won a state salsa competition. I was on TV.’

A body-building, salsa-dancing trilingual magician. You don’t get them everyday! That’s what I love about Couchsurfing: every guest is different. Nick was obviously more different than most.

‘Would you like to see my winning dance?’ he asked eagerly.

‘I’d love to,’ I replied with genuine interest. I quite like Latin dancing. Well, watching it, not doing it. I’m a hopeless dancer. I once took ballroom dancing classes but was so bad I was asked to leave.

He went and fetched his iPad and after getting my wifi password opened up YouTube to his winning dance. I watched it in amazement. He was good. He danced bare-chested to a very sexy routine; I wondered whether his stunning looks had impressed the judges more than his dancing. But this was being cynical and unfair. The guy had real talent.

‘Nick, that’s fantastic!’ I gushed. ‘How long have you been doing salsa?’

‘I have started in high school and liked it so much I continued when I went to Uni. I have even done some teaching in a dance studio in Heidelberg.’

‘You’ll have to check out the Brisbane dance studios then. There’s a great Latin dance school here in West End. They’re always looking for new members. Maybe you could get a job as a teacher there.’

‘That sounds great. I’ll do that.’

I was trying to give him job ideas. Frankly, I wanted him to stay longer than a week.

‘It’s a good way to meet the locals,’ I continued. ‘Especially women. Speaking of which, do you have a girlfriend back in Germany?’

Stupid question. He probably had a different one for every day of the week.

‘I did have. We were going out for almost two years. But we have split up a couple of weeks ago.’

‘Why?’

‘She didn’t want me to go travelling. She said I had to decide between her and Australia. I chose Australia.’

What a selfish bitch! Nick had made the right choice.

‘Well,’ I said in a comforting tone, ‘A good looking guy like you won’t find it hard to find lady friends here.’

He looked embarrassed then said, ‘A new girlfriend is the last thing I want while I’m travelling. That would only complicate things. But some female company from time to time would be nice.’

He smiled in a wink-wink, nudge-nudge kind of way and I smiled back, acknowledging that I knew what he was getting at. (Crudely put: pussy.)

‘Just remember Nick,’ I said seriously, ‘that if you want to spend the night with a girl, do it at her place. I don’t allow strangers in my house.’

‘Yes, I know, Joe. I have read it in the house rules.’

‘Ok. Just so we’re clear.’ I don’t mind couch surfers staying here but I won’t have them turning my place into a brothel.

I changed the subject to his taste in films, music and books, speaking in German again to give the poor guy a bit of a break. He’d had enough on his plate for his first day.

After we’d exhausted these topics he said: ‘How about you tell me about yourself. You know all about me now.’

‘Fair enough. I’m 39 years old, was born in Maryborough, a small town north of Brisbane, where I went to school. I worked a couple of years in my parents’ garage after I finished school then I came to Brisbane to study Arts but failed the first year. Too much partying and skipping lectures. Then I decided I wanted to become a police officer and went to the Police Academy for four years. After graduation I was posted to West End where I’ve been for the last 10 years.’

‘So you’re a *Bulle* (cop)!’ Nick exclaimed in surprise. ‘This is not stated on your profile page.’

‘No. I don’t like to advertise the fact.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, I figure it might put some people off.’

‘I don’t think it would. I think a lot of people might consider a cop would be a good host.’

Yeah, right. A lot of people have problems relating to police. They feel threatened, intimidated, judged. Simply put, the presence of a cop makes people feel uneasy.

‘What about your family?’ Nick asked.

‘My father and mother are still alive and have been running the same garage in Maryborough for 25 years. I have a 30-year old brother who’s a complete waste of space. He’s unemployed, still lives at home, drinks and sponges off my parents. Spoilt bastard.’

‘Have you ever been married?’ Nick probed.

This was starting to get a bit too personal. But fair’s fair—I asked about his love life.

‘Never married. Nobody wants me obviously. But I live in hope.’

There was an awkward silence, but Nick didn’t probe any deeper. Thankfully.

‘Your interests?’

‘Well, I’m a passionate traveller, as you’ve probably read. Fifty-eight countries, and counting. I try to go somewhere new every year - to give me something to look forward to. I’m also a big movie fan...as you can see.’ I pointed to a cupboard containing my collection of more than 200 Blu-rays. ‘I go to the cinema at least once a week, usually on a Sunday night. I often take my couch surfers. Maybe you’d like to come with me this Sunday? You should be over your jet lag by then.’

I go Sunday nights because it’s not so busy and I can usually get a park in the free car park underneath the cinema complex.

‘I’d love to come,’ said Nick. ‘I mightn’t understand everything but it would be a good way to improve my English.’

We chatted on for a while then I glanced at the clock and said, ‘Shit, I have to be going. I’ve got an early shift today. Sorry to have to leave you by yourself.’

‘That’s okay. Do you mind if I take a shower and get freshened up?’

‘Not at all. You’ll find a towel on your bed.’

‘*Danke*. I’ll stay here for a couple of hours and catch up on my emails then I’ll walk into town. I’ve got a lot of things to do: open a bank account, buy a SIM card for my *Handy* (the German word for mobile phone is an English adjective that, curiously, has nothing to do with telephones), go to the tourist office and get some information on the local attractions and so on. If I have time I’ll walk around the city and try to get myself orientated.’

‘Sounds like you’re going to be busy. I’ll see you tonight then. No need to worry about dinner. I’m cooking kangaroo.’

Couchsurfing hosts are not obliged to cook for their guests: just a bed is all they are expected to provide. However, I like to cook kangaroo the first night. It’s not only an exotic example of Australian cuisine, it’s also a nice, welcoming thing to do.

‘If you could be home by six that would be great. It would give us time for a drink or three before I start cooking.’

‘Not a problem. I’ve never had kangaroo before. I can’t wait!’

I quickly got myself organised for work and dashed out the door, calling out a loud ‘*Auf Wiedersehen!*’ as I left.

‘*Tschüss!* (bye),’ replied my new guest. He sounded a little distracted. Probably reading his emails.

## Chapter 2

I got home at about 5.30pm. It had been a normal day: a couple of domestics, a drug bust, noise complaints, neighbourhood disputes and so on. As I unlocked the front door I could hear the TV. Nick was home then.

‘Hey, Nick,’ I called as I walked in, ‘*Wie geht’s?*’

No answer.

I poked my head round the living room door and saw Nick stretched out on the couch asleep. He was dressed only in boxer shorts. I walked over and tapped him lightly on his shoulder.

‘Hey, *wach auf* (wake up)!’

No reaction. I could hear him breathing softly and regularly, so there was nothing wrong. He’d just fallen into a comatose, jetlag-induced sleep. I’d seen it many times with my guests. Sometimes no amount of shaking would rouse them.

I decided to let my dozing Adonis sleep and went upstairs to my bedroom, stripped off and lay on my bed. I reached over and grabbed my iPad and checked my emails. I had received another Couchsurfing request, this time from a 23 year-old German girl. Not surprising, most of my requests - two thirds in fact - came from young Germans, most recently graduated from high school and looking for adventure. Germans are indeed the world’s most travelled people. Whether through affluence, number of holidays or sheer *Wanderlust*, they are in Australia in plague proportions. I mean this in a nice way, of course. Our fruit-picking industry depends on their labour. The question was, would I accept this request? I had a third bedroom that I use as my office. It had a fold-up bed in it so it was theoretically possible, and I had often hosted two people in the past. But I really needed my office at the moment as I was working on my tax. Besides, having two people from the same country was not as interesting as having two from different cultures. I decided to decline her request and dashed off a reply to this effect.

I put both the iPad and myself into sleep mode. It had been a long day. After a twenty-minute power nap I got up, dressed in an old T-shirt and shorts and went down to the kitchen. It was time to start preparing dinner. I put the oven on to heat it for 10 minutes, during which time I prepared an avocado salad. I then filled a tray with a generous number of *Pommes* (chips) and placed them in the hot oven. Now I set about preparing the kangaroo, placing it in a large pan and pouring in a small amount of red wine. I put the pan on fairly high and let the meat brown each side before turning the temperature down to 1. As the kangaroo steaks slowly simmered I went into the dining room and laid the table. Five minutes before the meat was fully cooked I woke Nick. This was no easy task. It took several violent shakes of his massive shoulders.

‘Huh?’ he muttered, as if in a drunken stupor. He looked up at me through his blue, bleary eyes.

‘Wake up, Sleeping Beauty!’ I said, smiling. ‘I thought I told you not to have an afternoon nap.’

‘Oh, sorry about that. I didn’t mean to. I came home at about 5 and started to watch some Australian television. I was so tired I went straight to sleep.’ He apologised again.

‘No problems. Australian television has that effect on me too,’ I joked. I handed him a glass of white wine.

‘Oh *Danke schön*, Joe!’ He put the wine down on the coffee table and got up.

‘Could you excuse me for a minute please?’

He went out of the room and a little while later I could hear the toilet flush. He returned, now wearing a tight-fitting white tank top. He sat down and picked up his wine. We clinked glasses, and with a loud ‘*Prost!*’ (cheers) we toasted his arrival.

‘Ooo, that’s nice!’ he said after sampling the wine.

‘Yes, it’s a Sauvignon Blanc from the Marlborough district of New Zealand. I’m afraid I’m not a very patriotic Australian where wines are concerned. I drink only New Zealand whites and French reds.’

We had just started chatting about his day when the timer went off. I went into the kitchen and served out the meals. When I put the plates on the table Nick whipped out his *Handy* and took some pictures of his first-ever kangaroo meal. This is not an unusual reaction; many of my guests do the same thing.

‘That looks fantastic!’ he said.

‘I hope it tastes fantastic.’ I replied. ‘*Guten Appetit!*’

I cut off a piece of the meat and gingerly chewed it. You never know what you’re going to get with kangaroo. Sometimes it’s as tough as shoe leather—especially if it’s cooked too fast and hasn’t been marinated; other times it’s melt-in-your-mouth tender. This wasn’t too bad: 7 out of 10 I’d have given it. Nick was less critical.

‘That’s super *lecker* (tasty)!’ he exclaimed. ‘It has a kind of gamey taste – like wild pig or deer. I really like it.’

‘Thanks Nick,’ I said. I could tell he wasn’t pretending. Some of my guests don’t like the strong gamey flavour of kangaroo and refuse to eat it after the first mouthful, which I find incredibly rude. Luckily I don’t get many of these impolite and insensitive people.

As we ate and drank, Nick continued to tell me about his day. He’d done all the things he’d wanted to do: opened a bank account at Westpac, bought a Telstra SIM card for his *Handy*, went to the tourist office and collected a pile of brochures and maps. He said he’d started to walk around the town but was overcome by tiredness.

He decided to return home, calling in at the local supermarket on the way to buy his groceries for the week.

‘How did you find the locals?’ I asked.

‘The people are really friendly here. Much more friendly than German people.’

All my German guests say that. I go to Germany often and have never found the people there unfriendly. But I grant that they are more reserved, and definitely do not say ‘hello’ unsolicited, as Australians do.

I refilled our glasses and we chatted on a while till I suddenly remembered something.

‘Oh, I had a few minutes spare today and hunted up the phone number and address of that Latin dance studio. I also found some home pages of the gyms in West End and printed them out.’ I handed him the sheets that I had placed at the end of the table earlier.

‘*Danke*, Joe. That was very kind of you.’

‘No worries. You should start checking out jobs as soon as possible. There are a lot of back-packers around at the moment. It’s often a matter of the one who gets in first gets the job.’

He said he’d get straight onto job-hunting early the next morning. I told him that most of my guests use Gumtree – a brilliant internet site where many available jobs in Queensland were listed. He told me that if he couldn’t get a job in Brisbane he would look for fruit-picking jobs in the countryside, like some of his friends had done.

‘Well, I’d be careful,’ I cautioned. There are a lot of disreputable fruit growers out there and many of my guests have had bad experiences.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Some work for weeks and don’t get paid. Some get paid by the bucketful not by the hour and end up earning less than \$5 an hour. Some lose most of their earnings in exorbitant accommodation charges.’

It was true. It’s an absolute scandal how some unscrupulous fruit and vegetable growers exploit naive and defenseless backpackers. I had a Belgian guy a couple of weeks ago who found a job on a farm in Dalby on the Darling Downs and he was first asked to pay an accommodation deposit of two weeks. Luckily I have a cousin in Dalby whom I asked to do some investigating for me. She discovered that the address of the farm given on the website didn’t exist, nor was there an office in the main street where there was supposed to be one. Bastards!

Nick was starting to look worried.

‘I’d suggest you stay a little longer and try to find a good job in Brisbane. I’ll help

you in any way I can. I might even consider lowering your rent to \$10 a day.'

'That's very kind of you Joe!'

'No worries.'

I got up and took the dishes into the kitchen, leaving Nick to mull over my last remarks. I quickly prepared the dessert: a bowl of strawberries, raspberries and blueberries, over which I poured some light cream. I sprinkled some grated chocolate and nuts over the top and took the bowls into the living room. We ate the desserts sprawled in the lounge chairs. Once again Nick was super impressed with my culinary prowess. (It was no big deal really. I usually prepared the same thing for all of my guests, so I was well practiced.)

When we'd finished I said: 'Well *mein Freund*, you've read the house rules. You know what happens now.'

'Yes, the one who doesn't cook has to clean up.'

'*Exactement.*'

'That's fair,' he said getting up and taking the dishes. 'I'm happy to do it.'

Ten minutes later I went into the kitchen to see how he was going. I was impressed to see that the room was spotless and that all the dishes had been rinsed and placed neatly into the dishwasher, as per the house rules.

'Great job, Nick! Now go back and sit down and I'll bring us a night cap.'

'*Wie bitte* (pardon)?'

'*Ein Schlummertrunk*, ('slumber drink'),' I explained as best I could. There was no real German equivalent.

I took out two small crystal spirit glasses, fetched a bottle of Finnish vodka out of the freezer and filled the glasses to the brim. I carefully carried them into the living room.

'Now you have to drink this in one swig,' I instructed as I handed him the glass. 'But first of course we have to say *Na Zdrowia* (Russian for 'to your health').' That was another little tradition *chez moi*.

He smiled and clinked his glass against mine. We both said a loud *Na Zdrowia* and swallowed the potent spirit in one mouthful. Nick, obviously used to drinking like this, let out a satisfied sigh.

'That's really good vodka!'

'I know. It's my favourite.' I was a seasoned vodka drinker (some would say too seasoned) and had tried many different brands from many different countries,



including Russia (of course), Poland, France, Sweden and Finland. 'Finlandia', from the latter, was by far the best of the affordable vodkas, in my opinion.

As I stood up to take away the empty glasses, Nick also got up. He came over to me and gave me a big bear hug.

'Joe, that was a fantastic meal. *Vielen, vielen Dank!* You are a very nice and generous person. Thank you also for all you have done for me today. I really appreciate it.'

'No big deal. *Nur das Beste für die Gäste* (only the best for the guests),' I replied humbly.

'I hope all my future Couchsurfing hosts are as good as you.'

I doubt it, I thought, not so humbly.

I asked Nick if he wanted to watch anything on TV but he declined, saying this wouldn't be a good idea given his track record. He was still very tired and wanted to get a good night's sleep. I said okay and left him to settle down for the night. As I climbed the stairs, I said: 'Nick, I probably won't see you again till tomorrow evening as I have another early shift tomorrow. Will you be all right?'

'*Ja*, I know where everything is. I have my food for breakfast so I'll be fine.'

'*Gute Nacht* then, Nick.'

'*Gute Nacht*, Joe. And thanks again.'

Enough with the thanks, I thought. But I was glad that he was grateful and I was impressed by his good manners. If only all my visitors were as appreciative as Nick.

.....

The next evening Nick had some good news – he'd found a job. Two actually. He'd gone to the dance studio and shown them his YouTube video. It just so happened that one of the male teachers had quit so they were desperate to find a replacement. No doubt they liked the idea of having a hot young teacher who might bring in the female clients. The job involved Thursday-Saturday night classes from 7-10pm. It was dependent on a reference from the dance school in Heidelberg but Nick had instantly dashed off a request and it should arrive in a day or two. The other job was just clearing tables and dish-washing at an Italian restaurant in the city from Mondays-Wednesdays, 6-11pm. The hourly rate of \$16 wasn't much but it would help pay the bills. I got the impression that money wasn't an issue with Nick—more the chance to meet people and practise his English.

It was a perfect arrangement. Working at night gave him the opportunity to sleep mornings and work out in the afternoons. It looked like he would be staying a while, at least till he found his own place.

‘Oh good,’ I said, after hearing the news, ‘that leaves Sunday nights free. Are you still up for a movie this Sunday night?’

‘*Absolument!*’

‘Great. Let’s have a look at what’s on.’

I opened a movie app on my iPhone and we surveyed the list of films playing at the South Bank Cinemas Sunday night. We opted for an action movie that appealed to both of us. Action films are better for foreigners not totally proficient in English. There’s less dialogue to worry about.

‘I’ll book our seats online later tonight,’ I said.

By the next evening the reference from the Heidelberg dance school had come through and, with my help, Nick made a translation into English. They obviously thought highly of him, both in his competence as a teacher and his reliability. I was sure this would clinch the deal. He hurried off to the dance studio to drop in the documents. An hour later he came back beaming, announcing that they had given him the job, starting tomorrow night. We celebrated with a large Finlandia. Several actually. The more the alcohol took affect, the more Nick opened up about his family. It was an incredible story.

He told me that his mother was unable to have children so both of his brothers were adopted. Because the parents wanted a larger family, and because the adoption of the two boys was such a difficult and drawn-out affair, they decided to try surrogacy for the third child. Nick’s aunt (his mother’s younger sister) readily agreed to be the surrogate mother. Not a good idea, as it turned out.

During the pregnancy a strange thing happened. As the gestation progressed, Nick’s father began to become more attracted to the mother-to-be, so that by the time Nick was born his father had become estranged from his wife. While he tolerated the latter being the legal mother of the surrogate son (to deny her this would have been both unfair and cruel) he was now completely in love with his sister-in-law. Six years later he could bear the situation no longer and left his family to be with her. Nick’s brothers and their mother never forgave him for this, which was understandable. But it was different for Nick who genuinely liked his aunt and felt drawn to her through their biological connection. This led to a difficult relationship with his mother who was jealous of Nick’s affection for her sister and constantly spoiled him to prove she loved him more. When he finally got to university Nick was relieved to be out of the house and free from his mother’s emotional baggage.

How’s that for a convoluted family history! It was now official: Nick was the ‘most different’ couch surfer I’d ever had. I hoped this interesting guest would allow me to enjoy his presence for more than just a few days.

.....

On Friday morning Nick gave me a run-down of his first night in the new job.

‘I had a great time, Joe. All the women were very nice and really serious about getting the steps right.’

‘Was the studio happy with your teaching?’

‘I think so. The manager shook my hand at the end and told me he was very satisfied with me.’

‘That’s great, Nick. Any problems with the language?’

‘Not really, but I think a couple of the ladies were flirting with me. I didn’t quite get what they were saying sometimes but they were smiling and winking while they were talking.’ We laughed. ‘I even got some tips.’

‘I hope you didn’t lead them on,’ I said seriously.

‘Well it was hard to resist one of them. She asked me if I gave private tuition.’ I bet dancing was the last thing she wanted to practice.

‘I hope you said no.’

‘Of course. The manager gave me strict instructions not to get involved with the clients.’

It was good to see Nick resisting his natural urges that first night. However, it didn’t take him long to succumb to the relentless pursuit of one of the women—a 40-year old cougar named Kate who had stuck her claws into him and was not about to let go. After class on Saturday night, as Nick openly, and somewhat proudly, confided to me Sunday afternoon, she drove him to a remote spot at the local beach where they had sex on the sand. It sounded very romantic. Kate had separated from her violent husband and was now living with another man to whom she wasn’t terribly attached. But he was kind to her and paid her bills, so she tolerated, or rather exploited the situation. Of course taking home her conquests for casual sex was out of the question. Thus the trip to the beach.

Nick showed me a selfie of Kate, a moderately attractive bottle blond with too much makeup and wearing an outfit 20 years too young for her. She seemed vaguely familiar. I wondered where I could have seen her.

‘Are you still alright for tonight?’ I asked, knowing what was to come.

‘I’m sorry, Joe, but I’ll have to bow out. Kate wants to go to a restaurant.’ No doubt she wanted more than that.

‘But I’ve already bought the tickets.’

Nick asked how much they had cost and then paid me for his. I was miffed. If you make an arrangement with someone, you don’t go back on your word. That was the principle my parents had drummed into me. But, from Nick’s point of view, I could understand that dinner and sex with an attractive woman was more appealing than an

unintelligible film with an ageing, overweight and unattractive Couchsurfing host. Still, an agreement's an agreement.

'Well, don't get any ideas about bringing Kate home after the dinner,' I growled.

'I know, I know. House rules.'

That night I went to the movies alone. Fuming.

.....

The week passed quietly. I hardly saw Nick, apart from the few minutes between my coming home from work and his going out to the restaurant or the dance studio. He found the restaurant work mindless and boring with not much contact with other people to talk to. The workers were all foreigners with poor English anyway so there wasn't much to be gained from talking to them. He adored the dance studio though, and his relationship with Kate seemed to be deepening. He was constantly texting her and sending her pictures. One afternoon, after a heavy workout at the gym, he got me to take a picture of him bare-chested in all his pumped-up glory.

'I know who you're going to send this to,' I commented dryly.

'Kate wanted to see what I looked like after a gym session,' he replied. 'She likes fit guys.' Well, she's hit the jackpot with you, mate.

That Sunday night I again went to the movies. As I was backing the car out of the garage I was waylaid by Vera Johnston, my 80-year old neighbour who was a friendly dear but lonely and who loved to talk. If you could get away from her within 10 minutes you were doing well. She started to quiz me about my latest guest.

'He's such a lovely boy. And so good looking! We had a nice chat by the pool yesterday morning.' I suddenly felt sorry for Nick. The 'chat' probably consisted of his nodding to her streams of verbiage. And with her broad country accent I doubted if he would have understood a word.

'I'm sorry Vera, I have to fly. I'm off to see a movie. And if I don't get there early I won't get a ticket.' I lied; I'd already booked online and printed out the ticket. It was a good excuse though and it worked.

'Alright love. I won't keep you. Have a nice time!'

Three and half hours later I was back. Nick's door was closed and the place was deathly quiet. I put my ear to the door to see if I could hear any suspicious sounds. (I'm not very trusting, I know, but I wouldn't put it past a randy 23 year old to let his little head control his big head.) Not the hint of a sound. After a quick *Schlummertrunk* I went to bed.

Monday afternoon I came home and didn't see Nick, which was unusual. Tuesday neither, but I was delayed because I had to see my accountant after work. On Wednesday I had late shift so I always did the washing in the morning. Nick hadn't

left his sheets out as requested in the house rules so I knocked on his door. When I received no answer I started getting slightly concerned. Had he started staying at Kate's place? No, that was impossible because of her partner. Maybe he had scored with another woman and stayed overnight with her? Quite possible. No matter, I had to have those sheets. I turned the doorknob and went in. I instantly wished I hadn't.

## Chapter 3

It was the smell that first hit me. The smell of stale blood; the stench of death. The bed sheets were soaked in blood, and there were splatters of blood on the floor and walls. Across the bed, facedown, was sprawled the body of a naked woman. I couldn't see her face, but I assumed from the bleached hair that it was Kate. She had been viciously attacked – there were dozens of stab wounds in her back and shoulders.

I backed carefully out of the room, not wanting to touch anything or upset the crime scene. I went back into the dining room and phoned the West End station. I then poured myself a vodka, sat down and tried to make sense of what I had seen. How could Nick have done such a thing? Assuming it was Nick, of course. What could have caused him to become so violent? He was such a gentle, placid guy. Though big and strong he wouldn't have hurt a fly. It *must* have been someone else. A jealous boyfriend of Kate? Her partner, probably.

Then a thought struck me. I got up, stuck my head round the bedroom door and confirmed my suspicion. Nick's things weren't there. He had gone.

It was not looking good for my ex-couch surfer.

.....

A half an hour later the place was swarming with officers. Forensic police had isolated the bedroom and were examining in minute detail the scene of the crime. I was instructed to sit outside in the courtyard and wait to be interviewed.

A little while later the investigating officer arrived: Inspector Trevor Browne of the South Brisbane Homicide Investigation Unit, an experienced investigator who was well known and well liked in the force. After he had surveyed the scene and spoken briefly with the forensic pathologist, 'Brownie', as he was affectionately and universally called, came out to the courtyard, accompanied by his sidekick, Sergeant Rick Steele. I had seen and spoken with both of them in the West End police station several times.

'Joe,' he said as he extended his hand. 'It's been a while.'

'Hi, Brownie,' I said. 'At least a year, I think.'

'You know my sergeant Ricky Steele?'

I nodded and shook Ricky's hand.

'How on earth did you get involved in this mess?' Brownie asked as he and his sergeant sat down at the table. The latter took out a notebook and pen, and got ready to record our conversation.

I explained to Brownie at some length about my involvement in Couchsurfing (which he'd never heard of), about Nick and his jobs, and the little that I knew about Kate, including her relationship with her partner.

'Did Nick often have Kate over?' Brownie asked.

'He'd only just met her,' I said, 'and anyway, he was not allowed to have women in my house. I'm very strict about this.'

'I see. So what was she doing here?' The question was directed more to himself than to me.

I asked him when the crime had been committed.

'The pathologist is pretty sure that it was Sunday night. Where were you at this time?'

I told him that I was at the movies, and gave him the details of the cinema, the session time and which movie I'd seen.

'Do you have any proof that you were there?'

'Why are you asking?' I said testily. 'You don't actually think that *I* did it? What motive could I possibly have had? I didn't even know the woman!'

'Calm down, Joe. We have to eliminate you from the enquiry. Obviously the boy is the chief suspect, but we have to explore other avenues as well.'

I thought carefully about what I had done with the movie ticket. It dawned on me that I didn't have it any more. When you want to leave the parking station after seeing a film at the South Bank Cinemas, you first have to hand both the movie ticket and the parking ticket in at the foyer and they give you another one with a barcode that you scan into the machine at the car park exit. It activates the barrier to let you out. I explained all this to Brownie.

'What did you do with the barcoded ticket?' Brownie inquired. 'That would have the time you left the cinema on it, right?'

'Yes, but I threw it away in the bin near the garage when I came home. And the garbage is cleared Monday mornings'. Damn!

The sergeant spoke up for the first time. 'Did you buy the movie ticket online?' I confirmed that I did. 'So you must have a receipt or a credit card statement.'

I explained that I had thrown away the receipt once the ticket machine in the cinema foyer had dispensed my ticket. As for the credit card statement, there was none. I have a 'Wallet' on the cinema website. It's like a debit account that you fill with money. You keep using it to pay for your tickets until it's empty, whereupon you refill it. There is no separate credit card payment for a particular film.

My alibi was not looking good.

The sergeant spoke up again. 'My wife and I went to see that movie last week. Can you tell me what it was about?'

I then proceeded to outline the plot in detail. The sergeant even asked me about the final credits in which there were some outtakes. 'Does that convince you I saw it?' I asked.

'Not really,' replied Brownie. 'You could have read it all online.' Unfortunately he was right.

'Well, you could ask my neighbour Vera Johnston. She spoke to me as I was driving out the garage. She will confirm that I left for the cinema at 8.30.'

'Okay, but that doesn't prove that you actually went there,' countered Brownie. He was right again. 'Unless you can come up with some solid proof of your whereabouts on Sunday night, we will have to take you in for further questioning.' He paused. 'Joe, do you have any personal thoughts on the crime?'

I suggested that Kate's partner might have found out about the affair and killed her out of jealousy. There might have been other jealous lovers too as Kate had been quite promiscuous according to Nick. Last but not least there was the violent husband who might still be harboring a grudge. Brownie said he'd check it all out. He and his sergeant stood up.

'That's all for the moment, Joe. I'm afraid we're going to go through your entire apartment, not just that bedroom. We'll also have to bag some of your clothes for forensic testing. I'd suggest you move out for a couple of days. I apologise for the inconvenience, but it's standard procedure.' He handed me his card. 'Give me a ring if you can think of anything that might help your alibi, or that could throw some light on the investigation. Give Sergeant Steele your mobile number and the address where you'll be staying the next couple of days.' He paused, then added, 'And please don't leave town.'

'Brownie,' I said as they were about to leave, 'can you give me any details about the crime? The murder weapon, for example.'

'Well, we don't have much yet, but we do know that the murder weapon was one of your kitchen knives.' (Oh dear.)

'Finger prints?' I asked gloomily.

'Yours and the boy's. We compared them with prints found on a protein drink shaker he left in his room.'

The fact that Nick's prints were on the knife was comforting. Well, for me, not for him.



‘I’ll let you know if we find anything else. We’re in the process of checking the airlines to see if the boy has left the country. If he killed that woman, it would be the logical thing to do.’ I agreed.

After they had left, I rang the West End station and told them I wouldn’t be coming in. When they heard why, they told me to take the rest of the week off.

.....

I had a couple of friends with whom I could have couch surfed, but I decided to book myself into a nearby motel instead. I couldn’t bear the thought of having to explain to inquisitive ears the gruesome scene I had just witnessed; I needed isolation, peace and quiet. I was in a serious situation and had to find a way out or I was fucked. After making the booking I texted Sergeant Steele the motel address and phone number then grabbed a few essentials (which included a bottle of Finlandia of course) and got out of that hellhole.

The motel room was just the ticket actually. It took me out of my environment and allowed me to think. I was very disappointed in Nick. Why did he disobey my strict instructions not to have Kate at my place? He knew how I felt about the sanctity of my home and he promised solemnly to respect it. And I, naively, trusted him. His air of innocence was just a veneer—he was using me, exploiting my generosity for his own physical pleasures. The bastard! It just goes to show that you can never really know people.

The next evening Brownie called round briefly with some news. I was not really in a fit state to take it in, having imbibed too much vodka.

He informed me that Kate’s partner had a watertight alibi for Sunday night. He had attended a Rotary dinner with several dozen others who could vouch for his presence. They were still looking into Kate’s former boyfriends, but this was not so simple and would take time. He’d also interviewed the husband who lived alone and did not have an alibi. He was under a restraining order, which he had not violated. It was the strongest lead so far; however, the police could not arrest him without conclusive evidence.

Brownie then dropped a bombshell. Fixing an accusatory gaze at me, he asked: ‘Why did you tell us that you didn’t know Kate, when you quite obviously did?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘West End police records show that you had interviewed Kate on two occasions when she came in to report being physically abused by her husband. Your signature is on the reports.’

So that’s where I had seen her!

‘Brownie, I interview dozens of abused women like her every month. How can you expect me to remember every woman’s face and name? I truly just forgot.’ He didn’t look convinced.

He then informed me that Nick had taken a morning Qantas flight back to Germany. The German BKA—*Bundeskriminalamt* (Federal Criminal Investigation Office)—had been informed and was coordinating investigations in Kronberg and Heidelberg, but so far no trace of Nick had been found. He seemed to have just disappeared into thin air after arriving in Frankfurt.

‘Well, there’s your killer,’ I said.

‘Possibly, or he could’ve disappeared because he’d been framed and he knew he wouldn’t be able to prove his innocence.’

The old bugger still wasn’t prepared to give me the benefit of the doubt. He got up to leave.

‘You can go back to your place tomorrow. We’ve finished checking it.’

‘Did you find anything?’

‘Nothing of any importance.’

‘And my clothes?’

‘All clean.’ That was comforting at least.

.....

Sleep that night was impossible. Too many thoughts were racing through my mind. I had to find a way of proving I went to that movie.

At 1am it came to me. When making movie bookings, I had got into the habit of taking a screen shot of the ticket before printing it, in case something went wrong with the printer. Once I went to print out a ticket and the printer was out of paper. After refilling the paper tray I tried printing the ticket again, but the website wouldn’t let me. It had registered that I’d already done it. From then on I made a back-up screen shot of the ticket just in case. Perhaps the screen-shot of last Sunday’s ticket was still in the computer’s memory. I knew I couldn’t wait till the morning, so I got up, threw on some clothes and grabbed my car keys, hoping that the effects of the vodka had worn off enough to allow me to drive to my apartment. I prayed I wouldn’t be breath-tested on the way. A traffic conviction was the last thing I needed!

The door of my apartment was no longer taped off. I quickly entered and raced up to the office, where I turned on the computer. It was obvious the police had checked it as it was no longer in sleep mode but had been shut down properly. I basically never shut my Mac down, except when I go away. I opened up a blank Word document. I pressed Command-V and miraculously a copy of the ticket appeared.

‘Thank you God!’ I yelled. I don’t know why I was thanking God: I’m an atheist. But I had to thank someone.

I printed out the ticket and came downstairs with my get-out-of-jail-free card. I drove back to the motel where I sent a text message to Brownie, giving him the receipt number of the ticket and requesting him to come round to my apartment first thing in the morning. I then downed three Finlandias in a row. I don't know if it was the alcohol or the overwhelming sense of relief and joy, but I suddenly and unexpectedly burst into tears.

I was off the hook!