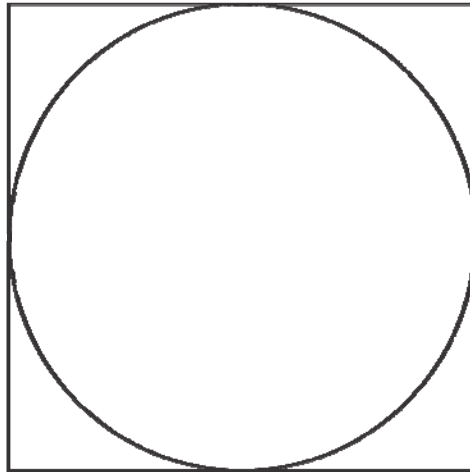


GYPSYROAD



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BY

GRAEME SHANKS

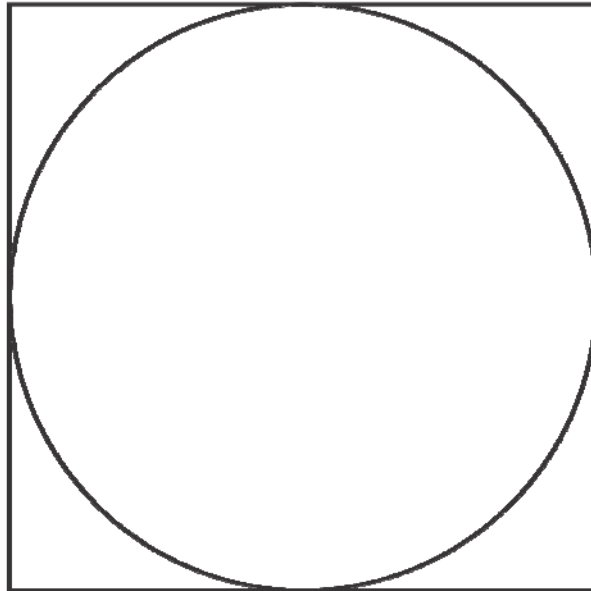
GYPSYROAD

* * * For a variety of reasons, this writing is classed as fiction. Graeme Shanks

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The square is consciousness, the circle . . . unconsciousness.

Sometimes . . . the unconscious becomes conscious.

INTRODUCTION:

The thing is . . . ever since my earliest years, and I mean . . . very earliest years, I've been surrounded by death.

I'd witnessed two deaths before my sixth birthday and had no idea that such a thing wasn't unusual. These deaths weren't violent, nasty, or complicated . . . it's just that people died when I came into contact with them . . . instantly.

I didn't know what to think. Death is, and was . . . not something people spoke about.

Life with my parents meant constantly moving house, although I didn't know why. My emotions altered over the years, and after witnessing more people die, I finally realized that this was in fact . . . not normal. Most people I knew didn't even know of anyone who had died, let alone see anyone die. I felt alone and not sure what to do. It had me believing that maybe something somewhat strange, and maybe . . . something completely out of my control was occurring.

I had no idea on what was taking place. I began to think that I was the cause, but how could that be . . . and if so . . . why?

The unwanted anxiety increased, and the whole situation became disturbing and almost unbearable. Then, one day, after another person died at my feet . . . things changed. The guilt and anger disappeared. I had come to the conclusion that even though death and myself were related . . . it was not my fault.

As time went on, there were more deaths. I felt the grief and sadness of all the other people affected return; but could do nothing about it. The only good thing, if there was such a thing, all the people who died around me . . . died instantly.

Once leaving my parents and schooling behind, I had to keep avoiding confrontation and innuendoes, changing places of work and living situations continually. I became involved in the horticultural world and immersed myself in all it had to offer.

Itinerancy became normal as I sought out new environments where no one knew me. I became educated in religious and spiritual concepts as I sought for reasons, all helping me at various times, but providing no answers.

Meditation and the acceptance of a higher level of consciousness helped relieve the anguish, as I moved from place to place, searching, but even this, did not give me any real assurances.

Finally, I found out what I had been searching for. I found out the 'how and why', and found out that I was indeed the cause. These people who died, died directly because of me, but it was because of something inside of me, and something inside of them, that I had no control over. All brought together by something called, 'collective-consciousness'.

Apparently . . . as I found out, I saved these people from 'a fate worse than death', as death would soon to be upon them . . . a death that would be extremely painful and lengthy.

I found out . . . there is such a thing as . . . 'a good death'.

CHAPTER: 1

Looking down . . . I saw something that had become all too familiar . . . a dead person lying prostrate at my feet . . . again.

Seconds ago this person was breathing and full of life, but as we came into contact, he collapsed. It was instantaneous and silent. Even without confirmation . . . I knew . . . he was dead.

Instinctively, I moved three steps back and glanced nervously around at the people nearby, shrugged my shoulders and held my palms outwards, giving the impression of . . . “I don’t know . . . ”

This was somewhat of a lie . . . I did know. For my entire life, certain people that I have come into contact with . . . have instantaneously died. There have been many. It wasn’t something that I was proud of, or even wished for. It was just weird and mysterious, and an inconvenience that had serious implications, and I hadn’t a clue as to why or how.

I was sixteen at the time, and enrolled at a boys-only prestigious boarding school in Geelong, Australia; one of those types of schools that you see in English movies where wealthy parents sent their children. Old large stone buildings, with stained glass windows, and interiors of ornate oak wood paneling. Orderly students in tidy uniforms, and lush vast grounds of sporting fields surrounded by large trees and gravel pathways. An upper class twit school.

This death . . . on a freezing cold winter’s day occurred during an ‘Aussie Rules’ football game at another school. My opponent had leapt above me to take an overhead mark, missed the ball, came crashing down to the ground . . . and didn’t move. As the umpire arrived, and called a halt to the game, the group of ‘footy’ players surrounding the player grew. He knelt down and checked the vital signs, vaguely tried CPR, raised his eyes, glanced around at us all and shook his head. I already knew the answer, but now . . . so did everyone else.

The sight of again seeing someone dead at my feet left me feeling somewhat emotionless. This time . . . there was no feeling of horror or surprise, and more importantly, no feeling of guilt or anger. I felt very calm.

Not only did I find this sensation welcoming, it felt uplifting. I still felt concerned, but the usual anxiety and weird feeling in my stomach from apparently causing a person to die, disappeared. I finally had come to the conclusion and understanding, that the death of other people and myself, were conclusively related.

I felt a certain amount of weight lifted off my shoulders at the realization that my emotional thoughts had almost disappeared. It was as though a light suddenly went off in my head. Worrying or concerning myself about the lifeless body splayed out at my feet, was pointless. I could do absolutely nothing about it. It was not my fault . . . something ‘out-of-my-control’ was going on here. I knew I needed to find an answer, but for now, I felt a certain amount of relief. Finally the horror and surprise had abated, as I fully understood that these deaths would probably keep happening . . . and I had to accept the fact.

Having witnessed death from a very young age, I thought that being around death was somewhat normal, it was only later as I approached my teenage years, that I

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found out that this isn't so. Once coming to this realization, I became more introverted and withdrawn and went through lengthy periods with thoughts of responsibility, concern for others, sadness, and then confusion. These feelings were only interrupted by . . . "Oh fuck . . . not again."

Now . . . for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel guilty, and the anger had disappeared, although I still had concern. I had thoughts, "If I am to blame . . . then maybe I should feel responsibility for all this misery. But should I? It was NOT my fault, and therefore, I couldn't be held accountable."

Whatever the reasons for the deaths were, I finally felt detached. I was incredibly sorry, but finally I felt free of the self-inflicted emotions that I felt were forced upon me.

In the last few years, I began to notice the reactions and emotions of those around me with more awareness and intensity, something I hadn't done when younger. Initially, I didn't realize that death caused grief. I thought that being around and witnessing death was a common occurrence and an accepted phenomenon. But I soon noticed that when any death did occur, the outpouring of grief and sadness, hysterical at times, occasionally filled me with surprise. As I had no intention to cause death, I had no reason to feel guilty. But increasingly, I did feel guilt, as it was other people's reactions that created it. And . . . now they were gone.

There was nothing that could be done to save the person lying on the ground, but I still had concern for the relatives and friends of the deceased. It was one thing not to feel guilty about the person who had died, but another not to be remorseful and caring about the other people affected. Even though I had not been personally attached to any of the deaths, I did understand that to lose a family member, or close friend, would have to be incredibly traumatic.

I understood the initial need for grief, but I didn't fully understand why people would accentuate and prolong grief. At times, when I saw someone die, this is what created the lasting impression. It seemed to me, to be such a waste of time and self-indulgent. I understood that when a young person dies, there is always the question of a life unfulfilled, which understandably created sadness. I knew that in front of me, lying on the ground . . . was this bond between human beings that had now been broken. I understood that being alive is a 'gift' and precious, and to have a loved one suddenly 'not be there' would have to be disconcerting. But it left me wondering if the reasons for grief were completely rational, or if they were due to a lack of understanding.

* * * * *

My parents were both Presbyterian ministers . . . at least my dad was, and my mum was almost fully ordained as one, and part of their work meant dealing with the aftermath of death, organizing funerals, consoling loved ones, and administering the final moments before burial. As a young boy, because of the Church thing, I had come to witness funerals complete with sad and somber people crying in my house, and I always wondered why the atmosphere was so depressing.

I thought that, "Surely a religion that promotes the after-life as a better place, should promote happiness whenever someone dies . . . not sadness."

When an old person dies . . . well . . . that's what old people do . . . they die, and when they do, they supposedly go to a better place . . . at least that's what I had been told. Surely it is the same for a young person. "So why all the sad faces?" To me, I didn't understand why people were so sad about death, to me it had become a fact of

life and fairly common. The only reason why I felt depressed was because other people were depressed. Maybe it really was a case of people not fully understanding death . . . me included.

I always had this feeling of guilt that I felt instilled in me from a very young age, no matter what my actions and thoughts were. When someone died near me, this emotion, is what I felt the most. I knew that it had to have come from somewhere, and because of my parents intense involvement in the Church, it must have come from those teachings. Once coming to this realization, I had trouble comprehending why the Christian institution would promote it, until I recognized that maybe they had their own self-interests in mind.

Maybe the installation of 'guilt' was a way to keep their 'congregation' together. If people feel guilty, they will then need somewhere to seek so-called, confession and redemption. One thing that Christians repeat is, 'everyone's a sinner in the eyes of the lord', and what I had been taught and come to learn, meant that no matter what I did; I, as a 'Christian', would naturally 'feel guilty' . . . always.

Another thing that didn't help alleviate my guilt feeling, was that whenever seemingly involved in someone's death . . . my parents decided to move house. They changed houses five times before they eventually sent me to a boarding school. Initially I didn't think much of it, but after a few times, I began to realize that it mysteriously coincided with a death that I had witnessed.

At first, being only five years old, I had no clue or understanding about the reasons and implication of death . . . they seemed normal. But after seeing a few people die, I recognized that there was something a bit strange in the way that they died and the fact that I happened to be the last person who had come into contact with them.

My first image of death was in Creswick, a small old gold mining town, in central Victoria. I wasn't born there; I was born in Ballarat, a much larger town about twenty miles away that had a hospital. At the time there was no such thing as television, computers, or electronic goods. It seemed that the only things that plugged in, were the refrigerator that iced up, a few kitchen appliances, and the washing machine with its two manual rollers that squashed the water out of the clothes before they went into the basket to be carried out and hung up on the 'Hills hoist'. Communication between houses, was via a telephone system went through a local operator; controlled by a person who probably knew everybody who used it. Things were a lot less complicated back then.

My parents let me walk to school by myself, as this small country town had no issues about a five year old walking the streets to school, a journey of about ten to fifteen minutes. Everyone probably knew me anyway, as I was the son of the local Presbyterian Minister. I had started school a year earlier than I should have and really didn't know why, except that maybe it was because there wasn't a pre-school set up in such a small town. Maybe my parents were too busy doing their 'Church stuff' and didn't have time, or inclination, to look after a five year old. Maybe they thought that if I could walk around the house for fifteen minutes, then maybe I could walk to school and stay there for the day.

There aren't many memories about my early years, or times at school, although there were a few things that created a lasting impression. I remember the walk to and from school past the old shops. I remember that my shoelaces wouldn't stay tied up and would end up being un-tied for the duration of the day, as I hadn't mastered the art of tying them up yet. I remember the big red-bricked house that I lived in, next to the even larger red-bricked Church surrounded by an area of large pine-trees that on

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Sundays filled up with parked cars. What lingers most in my mind though is being at the local swimming pool one day when a classmate of mine died, and another occasion, when playing on a snow-covered hill . . . another one died.

One hundred years ago, Creswick would have been bustling, but now 'sleepy', was probably a better description. The town's swimming pool, on the edge of town, was in actuality, a disused and flooded gold mine shaft, and through the eyes of a five year old, this was the most defining entity of the town. It was huge, almost a lake. It had a long concrete edge along one side with a high diving board and next to that, a smaller one. A large flat area led to steps that led up to a kiosk and the changing rooms. At one end of the flooded mineshaft, next to the concrete area, a shallow water section with a perimeter fence that extended out into the water. It was reasonably large with a sandy bottom and safe area that you could swim in if you couldn't really swim. Beyond the fence, just dark blue water . . . no bottom.

On hot afternoons during the summer months, a schoolteacher would occasionally take the class to the swimming pool, about five minutes away from the school. After changing into our swimming togs, we were herded to the shallow end of the pool and told not to stray. Our options were to either play in the water, or play on the surrounding grass.

On one occasion, a friend and I did stray, and found our selves at the diving board area. We found ourselves close to the edge, peering down at the bottom-less water. I can't remember exactly what happened next or how it happened, but I think I nudged my friend with the palm of my hand and pretended to push him in. Much to my surprise he immediately collapsed, and then fell into the water.

I stood and stared down at the water and waited for his head to pop up but it didn't. I heard the voice of the teacher from over at the shallow end, calling me, telling me to move away from the edge. She had apparently seen and heard the splash of the boy falling into the water. I couldn't speak or move; all I could do was stare down to where my friend had disappeared.

The teacher rushed over to get me away from the edge, but I felt immobile. I was stunned at the disappearance. I kept pointing to the water. The teacher pulled me away, and told me to go over to where the other children were. She stared at the water for some time, and then ran up the steps to the kiosk. When she came back she told us all to go and get changed, then another teacher came and walked all the other children back to school, while my teacher and I stayed at the swimming pool.

We were sitting on the steps as a police car arrived and two policemen got out and came up to us. While waiting, the teacher had walked down the steps to the edge of the pool and back, probably a hundred times. The policemen, the teacher and I walked to the edge of the pool to the spot where the boy had disappeared. They stared at the water as they asked me what had happened, before one of the policemen took off most of his clothes and jumped in. After awhile he climbed back onto the concrete edging shaking his head at the other policeman who then told the teacher to take me back to school, and then take me home.

My parents had heard that something had happened at school and asked me about it. I explained what happened and they didn't really say much except to say that they were sorry my friend was gone, and that I could have some extra dessert for dinner.

At school the next day, everything seemed and appeared normal; no one really spoke of the incident to me; not my teacher, or even the other children. It made me feel alone, and I became a little quieter and more reserved, as I couldn't escape the image of my friend falling into the water and then . . . disappearing.

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That winter, it snowed. It didn't usually snow in Creswick or the Ballarat region, as it was a long way from the mountains. Admittedly, it was one of the coldest regions in the state, but usually no snow; lots of puddles with thick ice and mud that would freeze like a rock overnight, but no real snow. One night it snowed so much that school had to be cancelled for the day. It had snowed all the previous day and all the previous night as well. Usually there were occasional flurries, but nothing would settle on the ground for very long, but this time, it really snowed.

That morning, I walked to school and it wasn't until I arrived that I found out that school was cancelled for the day. In those days it was hard to inform people of situations like this and since most of the teachers and children couldn't get to school, those of us who were there, were told to go home.

I ended up walking from school with three other boys, when someone decided that going sledding would be a good idea. I didn't know the names of the other boys, as they were in classes above me, and I didn't hang out or socialize with any of them. It didn't matter; on this particular day we were together. We didn't bother to tell or ask our parents, because as far as they were concerned, we were at school. Even though Creswick wasn't a mountainous region, the snow-covered hills provided a unique opportunity and there happened to be a steep hill next to the swimming pool, the old flooded mineshaft.

As we made our way through town, we found a sheet of tin in a vacant block that would be suitable as a sled and headed up to the top of the hill. On the way, as we walked past 'this large flooded hole in the ground' and its swimming pool stuff, we could see that it was frozen over. The ice at the edge was thick and you could walk on it, but we could tell that you couldn't go to far, before it got thin. We threw rocks at it and watched the rocks break through the ice about forty or fifty foot from the edge. We figured out that if we sledded down the hill and steered away from the edge, we would be O.K.

After we made our way to the top of the hill and the first boy slid down and crashed into a tree, we made sure to point the next one in the right direction and made sure he was balanced on the sheet of tin properly. I remember him having trouble trying to zip up his jacket. I took off my gloves and zipped it up for him just before we pushed. He took off like a rocket; straight down the hill and missed everything. We had told him to steer away from the ice, or fall off. He didn't, and for some reason he didn't look in control of the sled. As soon as he took off, he slumped over with his head falling between his knees with his hands dragging along in the snow, not even hanging on. The speed of the tin sheet carried him out onto the ice and into the middle where the ice broke and he disappeared.

We were still at the top of the hill and stood and stared in stunned silence. The pause changed to distress as we ran, fell, rolled, and slid down to the edge of the iced over mineshaft. We could see broken ice and a gap in the ice way out in the middle, and that was it . . . nothing else . . . no person in the water . . . and no sheet of tin. We called out numerous times, but no answer. We walked around the edge in either direction staring at the center of the ice, calling his name, but still . . . no movement.

Wandering away from the hill, towards the concrete edge to the swimming and diving section, we just sat on the steps, staring out at the broken ice. We didn't know what to do. An hour or so passed. Every thing was so silent. After awhile we just looked at each other, gathered our things, got up, and started walking towards the center of town where we stopped, glanced at each other and went our separate ways, back to our own homes.

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As soon as I arrived at my house, my mother questioned me as to why I was home, and as to why I was all wet and cold. I explained that school was cancelled and that a few friends and I went sledding, and that one of the boys slid into the swimming pool and disappeared.

The look of shock and horror on her face was only interrupted when the telephone rang. She answered it and hung up, and it rang again. She spoke again and hung up, but then it rang again . . . and again. When she finally came back into the room her face was pale. She looked at me intently and then realized that I was still in my wet clothes and shivering and told me get out of them, run a hot bath, and get in it.

After the bath and getting dressed, I heard a knock on the door, before being summoned into the lounge room. A policeman sat in a chair and I had to sit down and tell him the whole story of what had happened, after which he got up and asked me to come with him.

As I went outside I could see that two of the other boys were in the police car and I got in. The policeman drove us all close to the spot where the 'incident' happened and where another police car waited. As we all walked to the top of the hill we could still see the hole in the broken ice. After more questions and re-telling of the story, we were then all driven home again.

Nothing much was said at home about what had happened, although I was in a bucket load of trouble for not coming straight home from school after knowing that it was cancelled. The next day at school, and days after, it was eerily quiet. The other children stopped talking when I approached. I wasn't invited to play with them, and I seemed to be getting strange looks. I started to feel alone and never hung out with anyone anymore, and the other two boys, who were with me when this 'incident' happened, seemed to avoid me. As we weren't in the same class, when we did meet, we just looked at each other for a second or so, and then walked off. It all created a feeling of alienation that never left.

It wasn't as though I was blamed for the death, or even the previous death during the summer at the swimming pool. I just happened to be there on both occasions, and now, everyone was wary and afraid to talk or be with me, in case there was another. I didn't understand why . . . I had done nothing wrong.

I had plenty of time to think about the deaths, as I had no one to play with. As a five year old, I didn't dwell on the fact too much as I didn't realize that witnessing death was unusual. But, an underlying issue occasionally kept my mind occupied. Each time someone died, it seemed peculiar. During the summer, the boy appeared to collapse before he fell into the pool, and during the last episode, the same thing; the boy seemed to collapse as he was pushed down the hill, before he disappeared into the ice. I wondered whether each of them might have died before what was thought of as their death. It seemed really strange that such a thing would happen, and for that reason, I never told anyone.

My parents stayed strangely silent on the subject, and the talk of death never brought up. The only thing different in my life was that I was made to go to Church three times on a Sunday, instead of twice. At times, when I asked them about why do people die, the only answer given to me was, "It happens." But my life was about to change in other ways. Arriving home from school one day, about four of five months after the incident with the sled, my parents told me that we would be moving to another town.

Not long after, I ended up in a suburban area of Geelong, Victoria's second largest city. My father had become minister of the Presbyterian Church in Belmont, a suburb of Geelong, and there, I would start my second grade of school.

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We were provided a house from the Church, but I hated it. The house, situated on a main busy road, surrounded by concrete patios and a concrete driveway, had fences and neighbours' houses situated incredibly close. It was a harsh environment, and one devoid of personality. At the other house in Creswick, there were no neighbour's, no masses of concrete, and no fences. There were trees, lots of big large trees and the house was set on an acre or more of land, enough to get lost in.

This was different; this was suburbia. I missed the wide-open spaces of a small country town; I felt like I didn't belong here. The school near-by was bigger and a lot more crowded than what I was familiar with. It also was surrounded by masses of concrete. The only consolation was that I could walk there every morning, as there weren't any main roads to negotiate, making it relatively safe for a six year old.

I found school life a little imposing as I didn't know anyone, and didn't go out of my way to be friendly. I had become a lot more quiet and subdued since the last incident in Creswick, and spent a lot of time thinking about it. I had no one to talk to about these things, and my parents never bothered to ask me how I felt, about having my friends die. They must have thought that I was too young to understand, or too young for it to have an impact. I didn't really know what to think.

Maybe seeing people die wasn't unusual, and I shouldn't have even bothered wondering about it. The fact that my parents never even brought up the subject, or anything about where we once lived, seemed strange. It was as though they were trying to convince me that it never happened, rather than it being 'normal'.

After going to the new school for about six or seven months and trying to fit in, my life was again upended. Not long after winter, as I walked home by myself, I passed a group of older students who were throwing and kicking a tennis ball around. The tennis ball ended up at my feet and as I bent down to gather it up, one of the students, bumped me out of the way to retrieve it. He took one step, then fell face first onto the grass next to the road, and didn't move. As the other students gathered around, I suddenly thought that he could be dead. I stood there staring, as images of the other boys I had seen die back in Creswick flooded my mind. I slowly bent down and pushed him with my hand, but there was no response.

A lady came out from inside her house to see what the fuss was about as one of the boys had started yelling, 'HELP'. She then came over, looked at the boy on the ground and then went back inside.

An ambulance soon arrived followed by a police car and after inspecting the boy lying on the ground, the men from the ambulance came to the conclusion that he was indeed . . . dead. The policemen asked us what had happened and when questioned, the other students pointed their fingers at me. I gave my explanation, and the policemen seemed to be satisfied that it was some sort of faultless accident. By this time the ambulance men had covered the boy with a white sheet and were loading him into the ambulance before driving off.

One of the policeman finished talking to the other boys, and they walked off home while I was kept there answering more questions, before being allowed to leave. As I left, I looked around and noticed that the lady from the house was still standing there, looking over her fence, staring at me. It gave me a chill and I wondered what she was thinking, or knew.

I walked slowly home thinking about the strange event and the fact that I had again witnessed someone die. It didn't feel right that someone could just suddenly stop living. I thought, "Surely this wasn't right, there had to be reason." I hadn't heard of anyone else who saw people die suddenly and wondered whether or not it happened frequently. Being so young, there was no one really to talk to except my

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parents, but they weren't talking, and no one else bothered to bring up the subject either. I didn't understand, but I began to think that everything was all a little too weird.

A few months later my parents told me that we were moving again. We would be moving to Torquay, a small town on the coast about twelve to fifteen miles from Geelong. No reason was given to me as to why we were moving, just that we would be moving . . . soon. I wasn't really upset, as I didn't really like the house we were in and didn't like the school. I hadn't made any friends there, and the atmosphere changed after the accident. No one spoke to me at all, including the teachers.

For the first time my parents were not in charge of a Church, and so I didn't have to live near a huge building next to the house inundated with people every Sunday. Unfortunately, even without this, it did not remove me of my obligations; I still went to a church service every Sunday, once in the morning, and once again in the evening.

I spent that summer alone. I didn't know anyone, school hadn't started yet, which meant that I spent most of the time exploring the nearby parklands, the native coastal reserve between my house and the ocean, or down at one of the three nearby beaches.

Eventually summer holidays finished and I had to prepare myself to go to another unfamiliar school. It was smaller than the one I had just left, and more like the one in Creswick with trees and grass, instead of concrete. It appeared friendlier than the one in Geelong, although I didn't really make any friends. I seemed happier to be alone, wandering along the beaches after school every day for a few hours until I had to be at home.

I spent a lot of time on the rock shelves that surrounded the Point between the Middle and Surf beaches, not the safest places for a small boy to spend time alone, but with plenty of rock pools to explore, I found the area to be comforting. Occasionally, waves would crash on to the rocks and you had to sprint away so that you didn't get soaked from all the water, or washed away. It became a constant source of amusement trying to outrun the waves.

During that winter, after school one day, I found myself down at the Point, scanning the ocean in search of a penguin that I had rescued, kept for a few months and then set free.

It was one of those days when the ocean was wild and angry. I don't know why I bothered to look for penguin bobbing up and down in this violent water because if I were a penguin, I wouldn't be here. Maybe because it was the only friend that I felt that I ever had and after I had set him free, I wanted to make sure that he wasn't washed up on the rocks again.

While scanning the ocean, I noticed another boy from school. He was down near the edge of the ocean throwing rocks into one of the large pools and dodging the incoming waves. I gradually walked up to him to say hello, moving slowly because of the slippery rocks and a little afraid of all the wild water. I had just approached him, when a huge wave crashed on to the rocks and sent a wall of turbulent white water at us. The boy seemed to lose his footing and I reached out to grab his hand. As soon as I had it, he went all limp, and fell down onto the rock shelf.

Another wave came, bigger than the first, I grabbed his hand again but only had it for a second or two before it was wrenched loose and he was swept away by the surging water.

I found myself lying on the rocks, soaked from all the water, before I finally scrambled back across the rocks, and moved away from the edge anticipating another violent wave. I looked out at the ocean and all I could see was white foaming turbulent water . . . nothing else. I called out, again and again . . . but nothing.

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For some time, I stumbled along the rock shelf in either direction before finally making my way towards the beach. I continually stared at the ocean, hoping I would see something in the water, but . . . nothing, only the sight and sound of waves crashing on rocks. After standing on the beach for what seemed like an eternity, hoping to see someone emerge from the water, I finally wandered off towards home thinking of what had taken place.

The fact that someone had just disappeared was distressing, but what troubled me the most, was the sight of the boy being lifeless, just as I came into contact with him, reminiscent of other deaths that I had witnessed. It was not so much the fact that someone has died, but in the way that they had died, that caught my attention.

Walking back to my house, I thought, 'these deaths all seem strange . . . what actually did happen to these people? Was there anything that could have been done differently to change what happened? Do all people die this easily? Do other people witness numerous deaths?'

As I slowly walked I had no answers, and decided that I wouldn't tell my parents what had just happened. If I did, it would only complicate matters and the police would come, and I really didn't want to deal with that. Thankfully, they were not at home when I had to change out of my wet clothes, which I threw into the washing machine. As far as anyone knew, I wasn't down at the beach that day.

A few days later at school, there was talk of a schoolboy disappearing. No one spoke to me about it, and I didn't speak up either. The talk slowly diminished, until about four days later, when the body washed up on another beach further away. There was a bit of talk around school amongst the children and from the teachers, but my parents didn't mention anything.

I thought it amazing that my parents didn't want to talk about these accidents, as I would have liked to have been able to speak about them. It was as though they were frightened of something, or hiding something from me. It made me think that they didn't want me to know the truth about what was happening. I knew that I was young, but there were questions that were starting to develop, and I needed to know some answers. Having to endure silence about these matters only made me retreat into myself even further, searching for an explanation. Surely other people didn't witness death with such regularity.

Towards the end of the school year my parents told me that we would be moving to Melbourne by the end of the year and I soon found myself in Yarraville, a suburb in Victoria's largest city, Melbourne, and became enrolled in grade four at Footscray Primary School.

I didn't know why my parents decided to move to this place. The brown wooden house with red corrugated iron roof, on a small block, was ugly; the street noisy, and everything reeked of dirty, chaotic suburbia. What was wrong with the beautiful coastal resort of Torquay? It had trees, beach, clean air, and not many people. This was a complete turn around.

My parents never told me why we moved, and when I asked, they said it was because of dad's work. I never really questioned the answer, but I thought it a little strange since my dad got a job a long way away from where we lived. Being young it was not my place to question anything my parents did, but being old enough to think, I thought that this move to the city was odd. I sensed a feeling that they knew about the boy who disappeared in the ocean, but thought it better not to say anything.

School was awful, and once again I had trouble fitting in. All the other children seemed to have known each other for a long time, and I was the 'new kid' . . . again. They didn't seem to want me around or want to let me into their little groups and

since I had become very quiet and reserved, I found it hard to go out of my way to be friendly.

The old female teacher of my class seemed to not like me very much at all. For some reason, she hated the fact that I wrote left-handed. At this stage of education, writing skills were becoming important, and for some reason she wanted everyone in class to write right-handed. She would come up from behind and hit my hand really hard with a wooden ruler every time she saw me writing. I couldn't understand this, as I wrote well with my left hand, but had trouble writing with my other. We wrote with ink pens, where the pen had to be dipped into small porcelain inkwells imbedded into the desk and whenever she hit me with the ruler, pen and ink would go everywhere leaving a big mess.

After being hit repeatedly I would be left in tears, and on one occasion, even running out of the classroom and not stopping until reaching home. I only went back the following day, after my parents, the Headmaster, and the teacher had met. After that, the teacher allowed me to write left-handed, which only enhanced the feeling that maybe . . . I was different.

I hadn't been at this school very long, when walking home near a train station and almost under a bridge, another boy died. He was in my class and being hassled by a few other boys because of his German descent and as I stepped in to offer support, we came into contact whereupon he fell onto the road, just as a truck came around the corner and struck him.

Beforehand, he was almost in tears, pleading with four boys, who were much larger and older than him, to stop. As I approached, one of the older boys told me to move away, or else I would get hit. I didn't want to get hit, but felt that I should stay close.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a fist come towards me and I ducked, but the fist connected the German boy. He fell towards the road and as he did so, he reached out and grabbed my arm. He held it for a second or two before letting go, falling onto the road, lifeless. He lay there for a moment before a truck came under the bridge and connected with him, followed by a few awful thumping sounds and then the screech of brakes.

Everybody stared at the road. It was terrible. The truck had almost completely squashed the boy. His arms and legs and feet were going in all the wrong directions, and his head, which was thankfully facing down, was flat. And then the blood started to flow. Lots of blood; I had never seen so much blood. There were sounds of children screaming, while others stood in stunned silence. Some ran in all directions, including the boy who threw the punches.

A few of us stayed there not knowing what to do. A few adults arrived, including the truck driver who had stopped his truck just up the road. They quickly went over to check on the boy lying on the road, but it was obvious that he had died. They asked the remaining few of us, which included two boys who were hassling the German kid, what had happened.

About a minute later, a police car and then an ambulance arrived and a few of us had to explain to a policeman what took place. I failed to mention to the policeman that I thought he might have already died before he hit the road, as I thought it not in my best interests.

Things were starting to add up in my mind, not least the amount of deaths that I had witnessed. On the rest of the walk home, I couldn't stop thinking about the German boys' hand grabbing my arm and then it loosing its grip, as he suddenly became lifeless, and fell onto the road.

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That it was the last thing that he ever felt before he died . . . my hand. The truck didn't kill him, something else did. Something strange was going on, and the thought that I may have something to do with it created confusion. The thing that began to really disturb me was the thought that, with these deaths, they weren't dying as they appeared to die, they all collapsed beforehand, and on each occasion . . . I was the last person to come into contact with them.

Once again, this person seemed to lose consciousness before the accident actually happened. At this stage, I was still only seven or eight years old, but I began to think that something was very odd with these occurrences, but I wasn't sure. On all of these occasions the police were involved and all the deaths were deemed accidents and I was not at fault, but I started to feel guilty.

About two months after that boy died, my parents informed me that we were moving . . . again.

We moved to a house in Kyneton, a not-so-small country town in central Victoria. At least my parents, who were now once again in charge of a Church; had decided to move out of the city, much to my delight. I liked this town. Interesting old historical buildings made of basalt stone, mixed in with houses and shops of a newer era. A river meandered around the outskirts and through a Botanic Garden. It seemed busy and vibrant, although there was a feeling that once upon a time, this place would have been even more active.

The house we lived in was built of these large basalt bluestone blocks and the double block walls seemed to be about two foot thick. The house came with a Church on an acre of land, and both must have been over a hundred years old. The property had large hundred foot pine trees scattered throughout much like the place we were in, in Creswick. Across the road there was the Catholic Church, the biggest one (as usual), and on top of the hill, the almost as large, Church of England, and not far away were the Methodists and the Baptists, and maybe another one; lots of Churches.

The school was within walking distance and my parents enrolled me in grade five even though I was a little younger than the other kids in my class. This was probably due to the fact that I had moved so many times and my age and the school year weren't coinciding very well. Once again I had trouble fitting in. All the kids were country kids and had lived here all their lives, and they didn't seem to need another friend. I hadn't lived anywhere very long and especially since coming from the city, I didn't have anything really in common. I joined in the out door team sports and also the playground sports, but still felt that I didn't really belong.

It was this sense of not belonging. And the fact that I had moved houses a lot, which kept raising internal questions. Why did my parents move a lot? Was it because of me, and the deaths that surrounded me?

The fact that they did seemed to confirm this. It seemed that every time that someone had died in my vicinity, my parents would move a few months later. It started to occur to me that maybe not everyone witnessed death, let alone multiple deaths. Was I abnormal? Was this the reason that my parents didn't want to discuss these deaths, and not just for the reason . . . that I was young?

I had plenty of time to think of these questions as I explored this new town. I had a bike, and spent a great deal of time riding around town and down by the river, where occasionally, if you were lucky, you would see a platypus swimming. There was a magnificent Botanical Garden with an amazing variety of trees and numerous pathways where you could ride your bike, and a little way past that, connected by a trail, a concrete weir that crossed the river, creating a dam. At the weir after the rains,

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the water would violently rush over, and at other times it would flow over gently and you could cross the river, even though it was slippery.

Beside the river next to the weir, there were these huge Cypress trees that you could climb up into. They had a flat top, and after negotiating all the tightly clustered limbs and branches, they gave a view of the river and the surrounding countryside. Climbing down from one of these trees one day, when the river was almost full, I ended up talking to another boy from school. I didn't really know him that well, but we happened to be at the river at the same time.

We ventured out onto the weir and began throwing stones into the water, trying to skim them across. While we were out towards the middle on the really slippery concrete, the boy lost his footing and grabbed my shoulder. As soon as he did, he fell backwards and as I turned around, I noticed that his eyes were closed. He didn't even attempt to brace himself for the fall. He fell down onto the drier side of the weir, where he hit his head a few times on the rocks below.

I quickly crossed back to the river's edge, and climbed down over the rocks to reach him, and could see blood coming out of a wound in his head, and blood coming out his nose and mouth. There was no movement, and I lent down to hear some breath but couldn't hear a sound. The colour in my face changed as soon as I realized that he had died. I waited for a couple of minutes, but he remained lifeless.

I climbed back over the rocks to where my bike rested against a tree and kept looking back to see if he had moved. I really, really wanted him to move, but he didn't. With a sick feeling in my stomach, I sat down by the river. I couldn't believe I had been with another person who had died; I had only been in town for a few months.

As I peddled home, I recalled the faces of the people that I had observed die. The numbers of people were starting to add up and I wondered why. I began to have this strange feeling that, maybe I was the main cause. Why it seemed to be me that happened to be around when people died, I didn't understand. I continually thought of how they all died, and the fact that they appeared lifeless as soon as I had come into contact with them. As far as I knew other people, especially young people, weren't surrounded by death, especially deaths that seemed strange. The silence of my parents made it all seem a little peculiar as well. I kept asking myself questions, but for all of them . . . I received no answer.

I became even more introverted, and afraid to make friends, fearing that any contact with them may make them die. I didn't know why some people died and others didn't. I started to wonder if with some people, I shouldn't be concerned about their death, and with others, I shouldn't come into contact with them. I felt that I needed friends, or at the very least . . . one friend, just to give me consolation. With most people, I didn't want to discuss these deaths but I wished I could with someone, even if it was with my parents, who for whatever reason, wouldn't talk.

Another death occurred when I crashed my bike into a bunch of Catholic kids who had positioned themselves and their bikes all the way across the road in front of their school. They knew me as the son of the Presbyterian minister and saw me riding towards them. Not willing to back down, I rode at them. I thought some of them would move, but no one did, and I smacked into three or four of them. There were injuries, including to myself, but I was able to quickly get back on my bike, and ride off. Unfortunately, as I found out afterwards after a policeman visited home, one had died.

This happened during my first year of high school, and soon enough, my parents informed me that they were sending me to a boarding school. As I thought about the

entire constant changing of houses, I came to the conclusion . . . I must have been the reason.

This caused guilt to turn into anger, and the question became . . . why me? What have I done to deserve this responsibility of these strange deaths? These thoughts were narcissistic and selfish, but my life drastically changed every time a death occurred.

This guilt and anger increased until finally, on that day on the football field, it disappeared. To be finally removed of it, felt like the sun had finally shone through a thick blanket of clouds. It was almost as, a new sense of freedom was found, and now there was time to think and find out about the 'how and why' without the interference of excess emotion. I needed to find out the underlying reason as to what caused people to suddenly collapse and die, which then inflicted sorrow and pain onto others . . . including myself. These deaths couldn't be completely random. There had to be an explanation.

In the last few years, my emotions and concern had almost consumed my life. While there weren't an astronomical amount of deaths, there were enough that it had me worried. They only occurred periodically, at irregular moments and with no logical reason. All the people were seemingly healthy one minute, and then dead the next. And I . . . was the last person that they had come into contact with.

I had not heard of anyone else having to deal with this phenomenon. Admittedly, I had not spoken to anyone, except my parents, about the fact of being involved in numerous deaths, but there was always talk afterwards. Never had it been mentioned by anyone, that a death, where someone suddenly collapsed, was ordinary, and no one mentioned that someone else could possibly be responsible.

Thankfully for me, no one had linked this death on the football field or any additional deaths, to others that had occurred. Occasionally I did dwell on the fact of what might happen if I were directly linked, but I had to put these thoughts out of my mind as fast as possible as they would lead to only one thing . . . I would be accused of murder, and that just wasn't true.

My parents were the only ones who knew of numerous deaths associated to me, and they were silent. Whenever a situation occurred, or when I brought the subject up, it was always "Don't worry about it, it's just a coincidence", and they would change the subject. It was as though they had no answer. Maybe they were feeling guilty, and with their Church beliefs, they probably felt guilt just for having me as a son. That they and everyone else hadn't reassured me that there were others who had been, or were in this situation, or that it was a common occurrence, led me to believe that it may be unique.

To finally come to an understanding and acceptance, while retaining a certain level of calmness about unexplained death, the picture became clearer. This 'epiphany', and the realization that I may have to live with this situation, and may have to deal with this on my own, wasn't exactly a warming feeling, but suddenly everything seemed a little bit more in focus.

CHAPTER 2: 1968

After being informed that I would be sent to a prestigious boarding school located in Geelong, I became a little upset. Did this mean that my parents were getting rid of me? Were they upset about policemen periodically knocking on the front door? Maybe these deaths occurring around me were so unusual, and they were so sick of moving house, that they decided to move me instead.

Whatever the reason, I had the whole of the summer school holidays to think about where I was going and why. During this time I mainly kept to myself, riding my bike around town and hanging out down at the river.

I thought a lot about my situation. Maybe my parents had had enough of all the questions from people that they knew, which must arise when their son just happens to be in the vicinity, when people die.

Things were starting to make sense, although I was having trouble excepting the fact that there were more than just a few, who had died around me. And the questions, 'Why were they dying? Am I really the cause? Is there something wrong with me?' kept on repeating.

Whatever the questions were, there were no answers. My parents were still refusing to talk, and my brother and sister were never around; I am not sure that they even knew what was happening, as they had also been sent to boarding school . . . maybe to keep them away from me. Even though I went to church every Sunday, sometimes twice and three times, Christianity wasn't helping. I mean, I did pray a few times; but that didn't seem to amount to anything. And other questions arose. Were these deaths going to keep happening around me forever? Is there a way to stop them? I was sick of looking at dead people, and I wasn't sure how I was going to handle looking at a lot more.

At least it was summer holidays, and the naturalness of the river and parklands created a calming effect. There were no answers to all my issues, but at least there was a great deal of peacefulness around. I thought, as long as I stay away from people, things would be O.K.

But I couldn't stay away from people forever, and all too soon, school would start again, a brand new school, one where I would eat, sleep, and study; hundreds of miles away from my parents. I would know no one, which was not unusual, but being only thirteen years old, I wasn't sure that I would be ready for a complete life on my own. But, I had one hope; maybe people would stop dying around me if I weren't around my parents . . . maybe they were the cause.

My parents had me repeating a year; apparently I was too young. I had to do first year of high school again. Not only did this raise suspicions about my parents sending me away to get rid of me, but also about how moving from town to town had upset the natural flow of everything. On the whole though, settling into boarding school life wasn't too bad. If you lined up for food at the correct time, you were fed. If you made your bed really well, and kept your clothes locker really neat, you didn't get into too much trouble. The classrooms were right next to the dormitories and dining room, which meant it was really hard to miss your classes and meal times. The only time I felt really lonely was the first week, which was a little difficult as I did miss my parents, but after a short time I became comfortable not having them around.

This was a boys-only boarding school for rich kids, and while my parents weren't rich, they were able to get me accepted on some sort of scholarship that was given to the children of Presbyterian ministers. The school itself was split into two parts, the Junior School where I would spend two years, and the Senior School situated a few

miles away where I would spend the remaining four years of my school life. The Junior School, on a large expanse of land with two playing ovals for the use of football and cricket, had many tennis courts and also a vast amount of vacant area for other activities. I had never been at a school with so much open space.

Even though being a strict boy's only Church School with many rules and regulations, there was room to grow as an individual. You had no parents. There were headmasters and live in teachers that acted as an authority, and as long as you stayed out of trouble and played by the rules, you were basically left alone . . . not that trouble didn't find me.

In those days if you got caught doing something wrong, you were punished, and received 'the cane'. Six lashes on the bum with a bamboo stick, sometimes with your pants down, sometimes not. Also 'doing something wrong' was a little subjective and being caught for something minor sometimes resulted, in receiving the cane. The few times I ended up being caught doing things outside the supposed boundaries of the rules, I received penance. At the time I probably deserved the punishment, but that didn't make the pain go away. It hurt . . . it really, really hurt. Sometimes the lashings would break the skin, and your bum would bleed. Even if there was no blood, the welts were incredibly painful and hurt for days and days.

There was a fine line between creating the most pain, and drawing blood, and I think the headmaster performing the punishment, took his craft seriously enough, that when blood was drawn, he knew that he had over stepped the line. There was almost an apology, "Sorry, I didn't mean to draw blood, hope you're all right?"

"I hope you're alright . . . what sort of question was that?" You couldn't sit down properly for about a week. You needed to wear two or three pairs of under-pants at once just to get around.

After receiving 'the cane' for the first and maybe second time, you didn't go back to class, you just lay on your bed most of the afternoon crying. But after that, when receiving it, you went back to class straight away, and walked into the classroom with a smile on your face, and you sat down. The pain was excruciating, but you had to show defiance. It was the best way to gain respect from your classmates and to give the teacher a message that their punishment was futile. Afterwards, your classmates wanted to see the marks on your arse. They wanted to compare notes, and if they saw blood, their respect for you went up.

Apart from that, life at boarding school went smoothly. My parents would occasionally visit, and classes, dormitory life, and food were all relatively good. I seemed to be making friends, and nothing out of the ordinary occurred. The school seemed insulated from the rest of the world. I didn't have to leave; everything was right there. I even entertained the thought that maybe the situation of people dying around me had ceased, and that maybe it only happened in the outside world.

Unfortunately . . . as I was soon to find out . . . no such luck.

For a period of time the school had an adventure course set up on a vacant piece of the property. Some people had assembled things together that you could swing or climb on made of ropes, chains, and hanging car tires, supported with large poles and other pieces of lumber. We weren't supposed to play in this area un-supervised, but on one day there were a number of boys hanging around the area, and a teacher said it would be all right for us to amuse ourselves on the equipment.

About three or four of us were climbing this giant rope mesh thing that was supported by two huge upright poles and a horizontal pole about twenty feet off the ground. The giant rope mesh thing was draped over the horizontal pole, and you could climb up one side and down the other.

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I had climbed up one side and was almost down the other side, when someone else who had climbed up, got his foot caught as he was coming down the other side, and just hung there by his ankle. As I climbed back up, another boy who was up at the top, tried to free his ankle. I reached the boy who was stuck and grabbed his arms as his ankle became free. I didn't have a good hold of him, but he suddenly went all limp, and then tumbled past me and hit the ground with his head, and didn't move.

A couple of other boys who were on the ground called out for the teacher to come over who after looking at the fallen boy for a few minutes, told us all to go back to the school area. He told one to go to the school medical centre to get the nurse and tell her to call an ambulance. A few hours later, after we had found out that the person had died, myself and the other boy who were on the climbing 'net thing', were summoned into the head master's office and had to describe the tragedy. I thought it best not to mention the fact that he seemed to go 'all limp' just before he fell.

Even though not much more was said, I became distressed and concerned. Things were going along smoothly at this school, and I had almost forgotten about things like death. The fact that it had happened around me a lot, and that I may have something to do with all of them, had almost disappeared from my mind. I had hoped that this school would be insulated, and that I could carry on like other kids. But now, that had all changed. Yes, it may have been a complete accident, but so had all the others. No one at the school knew of my history, and so no one gave me strange looks, or treated me any differently, but it changed me. I didn't hang out with the other boys as much, and the only times that I committed to group activity, were compulsory organized events.

Finally it sunk in that others were greatly upset about seeing someone die. It wasn't something that I really comprehended before, but now, I became more aware as I happened to live with people who were directly and indirectly affected. When I saw this death, I became angry as soon as I saw that boy lying on the ground. I knew that he was dead. I remember hanging onto the rope apparatus and staring down at him and thought, 'I caused this.' I was in slight shock, but mainly angry that here, was another death. Where as others, became distraught and sad at seeing death.

I don't know if I was getting to be accustomed to death or not, but what upset me the most, was not the fact that someone had died in my presence again, but that it occurred in a place that I wished had some insulation from these types of situations. And added to this . . . the feeling of guilt.

This was the first time that I felt really, really guilty and the sensation became almost overbearing. It was the first time that I had put myself in someone else's shoes. Other boys were crying; teachers were frantic, somber, and disorientated. The next day, when I saw the parents, the mother was inconsolable and distraught. Witnessing all this sadness and sorrow, my personal anger disappeared, as I thought about what I may have done.

Thinking about it, maybe I felt some sort of guilt ever since I had first been around a death, or when I first thought that I might be the cause. Maybe the fact that my parents didn't want to discuss death, and moved house every time one occurred created and fermented this guilt. Maybe that was the reason that at times I didn't want the police to be involved.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had a sensation of guilt without really recognizing it. Either way, I now felt incredibly guilty, and I shouldn't have, as I had done nothing wrong.

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I spent a lot of time thinking about these deaths and, why me? Why is this happening? Are they all just simply accidents? Did I really cause all these? When and where is the next one going to happen?

All the thinking didn't matter as I wasn't receiving any answers, and it seemed like every thing was out of my control and the anger returned. All I wanted, and tried to be, was a good person and have a normal existence, but every time I became comfortable with my surroundings, someone fucking died. I was the last person to have contact with them and I was pissed off. I should have been sympathetic for the persons who died, but fuck them . . . what about me. They're dead; I'm the one who has to live with this shit.

Other death occurred at the school, which meant that in the last year, two boys had died. No one at the school had ever died before and on each of these occasions; I was the last person to touch them. The second death happened in a crowded assembly hall devoid of chairs, where every student stood during some sort of speech, and someone next to me collapsed and died. As it being a crowded room, I knew that I had come into contact with him. I saw him falling to the ground, and shuffled back between two other boys, and by the time others noticed, I had moved a little distance away. For some reason, instinct told me to move away, as during the ensuing commotion, no questions were asked.

The relief of not being questioned was huge. I had thoughts that on other times, by not telling the complete truth, I was being dishonest and this only added to my anguish. If I could avoid the questions, then my feelings of dishonesty were non-existent. Lack of questions also helped remove other people's thoughts that maybe there could be a link to other deaths.

I couldn't stop thinking about my relationships to all the deaths and whether or not they were really dying because of me? How is all this possible? And if so, how many other deaths had occurred because of me that I didn't know about? The thought of people dying because of me was disturbing. Why had it taken me so long for this to sink in?

As I thought of all the deaths, the realization that on each occasion, it was I, who was the last person to come into contact with them, left me with only one conclusion. I began to shake and couldn't get the thoughts out of my head. I had no answers. No matter how long, or how many times, I thought about the questions, I still had no answers . . . there was just anger, confusion, and guilt.

Outside of the classroom I had plenty of time to think. I would wander off by myself, usually to the edge of the property overlooking the river, find a nice spot to sit down, and try to make sense of it all. In my mind, I could see the faces of the people who had died, and these visions left me shaking, crying, angry, disappointed, and scared. Sitting there by myself helped, and by contemplating the issues, I believed there had to be an answer, but still . . . there was no escaping the faces of the dead.