

*The  
Best  
of Adam  
Sharp*

*Graeme Simsion*



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

## ***Before the Deluge***

If my life prior to 15 February, 2012 had been a song, it might have been ‘Hey Jude’, a simple piano tune, taking my sad and sorry adolescence and making it better. In the middle, it would pick up—better and *better*—for a few moments foreshadowing something extraordinary. And then: just na-na-na-na, over and over, pleasant enough, but mainly because it evoked what had gone before.

A day that began in my childhood bedroom in Manchester, boxed in by photograph albums and records, was always going to evoke the past.

My walk to the station, through streets grey with drizzle and commuters huddled into their coats and plugged into their phones, did not so much remind me of days gone by as stir a longing for them, for a summer under blue skies half a world away, where the music of boom boxes competed with

the laughter of carelessly dressed drinkers spilling from the pub onto the footpath.

My route took me past the Radisson Hotel, once the Free Trade Hall and scene of a seminal moment in popular music. Seventeenth of May, 1966. A heckler shouts 'Judas!' to the young Bob Dylan, who has returned after the interval with an electric guitar, and he responds with a blistering rendition of 'Like a Rolling Stone'. My father was there, in the audience, eyewitness to music history.

And on the station concourse, a teenage girl in a light-blue anorak and a beanie like mine was singing Adele's 'Someone Like You', a song about glory days, regrets and the passing of time. It might have been just a pretty tune had there not been the memory of another young woman, twenty-two years ago now, to give substance to the observation that love only sometimes lasts.

I leaned against the wall opposite the busker. Passengers passed between us, a few of them tossing coins into her keyboard case. She was singing without a microphone, leaving it to the acoustics of the enclosed space to do the work. Her playing was basic but she had a good voice and a feeling for the song.

I allowed it to wash over me, letting music and performance take the simple sentiments to a higher plane, indulging for a few minutes in the sweet sadness of nostalgia, so different from the everyday gloom I had woken to in my mother's house.

I tossed in a two-pound coin and earned a smile. There was a time when I might have done more: put a tenner in to get her attention, offered to accompany her so she could stand

up to sing, made a little personal history. That time was gone. These days I was taking more from my bank of memories than I was putting in.

The day might come when I had nothing but memories, and the choice of whether to indulge my romantic side and wallow in them, or my cynical side and reflect on their reliability.

Had I painted the Australian skies a deeper blue because they were the backdrop to my Great Lost Love?

Did they really jeer Dylan at the Free Trade Hall? A month ago, I had pulled the bootleg from my dad's vinyl collection, and my mother had thrown her own handful of mud into time's ever rolling stream.

'Your father had a ticket to that concert. But he didn't go. He had his own job to do and a family to look after.'

I would have backed the original version. My mother was constantly recasting my wayward dad as a responsible breadwinner and role model, more so lately since I did not have 'a proper job'. Which was why I was able to travel halfway across England in the middle of the week to take her to medical appointments.

No matter now. I would soon have more immediate matters to occupy my mind. Later that day, as I continued my engagement with the past, scouring the internet for music trivia in the hope of a moment of appreciation at the pub quiz, a cosmic DJ—perhaps the ghost of my father—would lift the needle on the na-na-na-nas of 'Hey Jude', say, 'Nothing new happening here,' and turn it to the flip side.

'Revolution.'

# **Part 1**

Text Publishing

# 1

I was back home in Norwich, reading up on Pete Best, the Beatles' forgotten first drummer, when the email popped up in the bottom corner of my screen.

*From: angelina.brown@tpg.com.au*

*Hi*

That was it. *Hi*. After twenty-two years, twenty without any contact at all, out of the blue, Angelina Brown, my Great Lost Love, decides to change the world and writes *Hi*.

There was a song to mark the moment. 'My Sentimental Friend', a hit for Herman's Hermits in 1969, was, thanks to the physics of headphones, playing in the middle of my skull. It would now have a place in the jukebox musical of my life, with the line about the girl he once knew who left him broken in two. Not quite Wordsworth, but sufficiently resonant that,

when the message arrived, I was thinking about its sender.

Was this the first time she had thought about me, letting her mind drift to a time when ‘Like a Prayer’ was top of the charts, wondering what happened to that guy she met in a Melbourne bar and fell in love with? Just a browse of her contacts list and a casual *wonder what he’s doing now?*

Click on Adam Sharp, type two letters, *Send*.

There had to be more to it. For a start, I would not have been in her contacts list. We had not been in touch since email was invented.

The address suggested that she was still in Australia. I checked the World Clock website: 1.15 p.m. in Norwich was a quarter after midnight in Melbourne. Was she drunk? Had she left Charlie? Had he left her? Maybe they had split up fifteen years ago.

She was still using her maiden name. No surprise there. She hadn’t changed it the first time around.

I knew barely anything about Charlie—not even his surname. In my mind it was the same as hers. Charlie Brown. The little bald cartoon character in his baseball mitt: *It’s a high fly ball, Charlie Brown. Don’t miss it, Charlie Brown*. In real life, I was the one who had missed it.

One night, after a few pints, I had googled her. I got nowhere. Angelina shared a name with an Equal Opportunity Commissioner and a newspaper columnist, and finding her among the litigation and opinions had been too much for my beer-addled brain. Unless I searched images. I stopped myself. Angelina was—*had been*—an addiction, and the only way to deal with an addiction is abstinence.

Maybe. Time passes. Every alcoholic wants to prove they're cured. Surely, after twenty years in a committed relationship, I could exchange an email or two with my ex-lover, who had, as the Americans say, *reached out*.

She might have a terminal illness and want to tie up the loose ends. I could blame the breakfast conversation with my mother for that thought. Perhaps she and Charlie just wanted advice on holiday options in northern England: 'Looking for somewhere cold and miserable to get away from this interminable sunshine.' What would it say about my relationship with Claire if I felt too vulnerable to respond to an innocuous query?

I let Angelina's email sit until the evening. I was still weighing my options when Claire arrived home. Our conversation was shouted between my room and the bottom of the stairs, but I could picture her in her important-meeting grey suit with the green scarf and the chunky-heeled boots that brought her up to a neat five foot four.

'Sorry. Meeting went a bit over. Dinner smells good.'

'Jamie Oliver. Chicken casserole. I've had mine.'

'Do you want a glass of wine?'

'Ta—bottle open in the fridge.'

'How's your mum?'

'Haven't got the results yet. I think she's a bit scared.'

'Did you give her my love?'

'Forgot.'

'Adam...Better not have. Have you fed Elvis?'

'You'd know if I hadn't.'



That was a fair snapshot of the relationship that Angelina's email might test. We were a functioning household. We didn't fight; we enjoyed meals together on the weekends; we looked out for each other. Good friends. Nobody writes songs about those things, but there is a lot to be said for them. We had done better than my pub-quiz teammate Sheilagh and her husband, Chad, who cared for everyone except each other. Or our friends Randall and Mandy, whose battle for custody of their IVF twins had left casualties from San Jose to Liverpool. Or my parents, for that matter.

But the last few years had seen a fading of what was left of the romance. Two months earlier, I had purchased a single bed for my study, ostensibly because of my snoring and Claire needing her sleep because she had a lot going on with the prospective sale of her software company. Our sex life had followed me out of the bedroom and I didn't miss it as much as I thought I would. I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

Our situation was probably not so different from that of many couples our age. It would be a stretch to blame any shortcomings on a relationship that had ended twenty-two years earlier. I didn't think about Angelina when I was deep in a database-tuning problem, or trying to recall the name of the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band's lead singer, or giving Claire a kiss on the forehead as she left for work. It was only when I was listening to music or on the rare occasion I played a song on the piano. For those few minutes or hours, I would be back in 1989.



I was playing in a bar—not a pub, a *bar*—in Melbourne, up a staircase off Victoria Parade in the inner-city suburb of Fitzroy. It was one of the few places that stayed open late, drawing a mix of yuppies and baby boomers. In those days, a baby boomer was a person born shortly after the war, not someone like me who came along almost twenty years later.

Most nights the boomers outnumbered the yuppies, and my sixties and seventies repertoire got a good workout. There was a steady trickle of customers early in the evening, but it only got busy with the after-dinner crowd and the stragglers from the pubs shaking out their umbrellas, piling their winter coats and woollen hats on the stand and ordering an ice-cold lager. It was early July, midwinter, and Australia had yet to deliver on its promise of sunshine.

The place would not have won any prizes for interior decoration. There was a bar that seated eight or ten on stools, a dozen small tables, a couple of leather sofas and old movie posters on the walls. No meals—just bar snacks. But once a crowd built up, with more patrons standing than sitting, the noise and smoke provided enough atmosphere to compensate.

I had been in Australia three weeks. A local insurance company was implementing a new-generation database and I had landed a fifteen-month consulting assignment that would give me a tour of its branches around the world. I was twenty-six, barely five years out of a computer-science degree, riding a wave of technology that the old-timers in their thirties had failed to catch. Computing was my passport out of my lower-middle-class, comprehensive-school origins—after I had abandoned the more obvious option of becoming a rock star.

In my first week in Melbourne, I tagged along to the bar with a few workmates to celebrate one of them becoming a father and ended up playing a couple of songs on the piano. I remember doing ‘Walk Away Renée’ in homage to the new arrival, who had been given that name. The barman, a knock-about bloke named Shanksy, gave me a half pint—a *pot*—of lager. I thanked him for letting me use the piano and he said, ‘Anytime, mate.’

I took up his offer and the bar became my social life. Shanksy looked after my drinks and I put a tip jar on the piano. I did all right with it, but money was not the motivation. My day job paid well and included an accommodation allowance, which covered a warehouse apartment above a vegetarian restaurant in Brunswick Street, a fifteen-minute tram ride from work and a ten-minute stagger from the bar.

I got to know the piano well. It was a locally made Beale, old, but with a nice sound, and there was even a microphone and a small amplifier. I would drop in on the way to work or after my morning jog and entertain the cleaners with my scales.

In the evenings, it made all the difference. Without it I would have been a loner paying for my own drinks, with no reason to talk to anyone and no reason for anyone to talk to me. And too much time to think about the hole in my life.

I didn’t see her walk in. I saw her when she came over to the piano. In a town that dressed in black, she was wearing a white woollen dress and high boots. Mid-twenties, shoulder-length dark-brown hair against light skin, maybe five foot

seven with the heels.

She had a pink cocktail in her hand. We were in what was technically a cocktail bar, but this was Australia and most people drank beer, wine and simple mixed drinks unless they got into downing shots—B52s and Flaming Lamborghinis. The collection of liqueurs behind the bar was more for show and Shanksy's cocktail repertoire was limited. But tonight he had produced a pink one. With a cherry and an umbrella.

I was playing Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl' and she stood to one side of the piano, close enough to let me know she was there, sipping her cocktail.

When I had finished, she clapped, walked up and asked: 'Do you know "Because the Night"?'

I had a chance to look at her more closely and was struck by her eyes: big and brown, and, under the right one, a streak of mascara tracking halfway down her cheek.

I don't usually notice perfume unless it has just been applied. Perhaps hers had been, because it was strong and distinct. For the record, it was Obsession by Calvin Klein. Ever since, I have been able to detect it at twenty paces. A woman steps onto the bus and I pick it up, along with all the memories attached to it. Proust's madeleines.

'It's by Patti Smith,' she said, while I was wondering if I should say something about her mascara.

'And Bruce Springsteen.'

'Say that again,' she said and laughed.

'Bruce Springsteen. They wrote it together. Springsteen never did a studio recording, but it's on his live album.'

*'Root it' togever, eh? Loovely.'*

Her impression of my accent would have placed me closer to Glasgow than Manchester but it was accompanied by a light-up-the-room smile.

I gave her a look of mock offence.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean to be rude. I just love your accent.’

I decided to take the risk of being rude myself and drew my finger down my left cheek.

We had an exchange of touching our faces, nodding and laughing as she got the message, wet her finger, rubbed the wrong cheek, then managed to turn the streak into a smear on the right one.

‘Hold on,’ I said, and walked to the bar where there was a pile of paper napkins. On the way back, I realised that the place had gone quiet, and not just because the piano player had taken a break. Everyone—from Shanksy behind the bar to the couple standing in the doorway still wearing their coats—was watching me. Watching us. I had no desire to play out in public what I had begun to imagine as a tender moment, nor to draw attention to the fact that she might have been crying.

I blew my nose on the napkin, stuffed it in my pocket and sat back at the piano.

‘So, “Because the Night”, was it?’

She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, then looked around the room.

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘You got most of it.’

‘Would you mind if I sang?’

In general, the answer to ‘Can I sing with the band?’ is a

polite ‘No’, a response based on experience and the advice of my dad. He used to have—he said—a firm rule that nobody, but *nobody*, got to sing or play with whatever band he was in.

‘If Eric Clapton comes in and wants to play, I’ll tell him he can bugger off. Because if the owner decides he likes Clapton better than us, then he’s got our gig and we don’t eat.’

He delivered his lesson in job security so many times that, despite the improbability of Mr Clapton deciding to settle for the audience and financial rewards of the King’s Head in Manchester, it became family history as an actual event.

‘You know,’ my mother would say, ‘your dad once told Eric Clapton to bugger off—’scuse the French, but that’s what he said—so he could get on with earning a living. There’s a lesson there.’

My dad may or may not have said ‘Bugger off’ to God, but I would be prepared to bet that his response to the young woman with the big brown eyes would have been the same as mine, even without the pressure of a bar full of people waiting for something to happen.

‘What key?’

She was not bad, and the crowd loved her. I mean, they *loved* her. She was in tune and giving it all she had, but it was a sexy song and she was more Olivia Newton-John than Debbie Harry—or Patti Smith, for that matter.

Who was I to judge? She got a standing ovation and calls for more. After one five-minute performance she owned the place, and I was a part of it. I had no idea what was going on.

‘Would you like to do something else?’ I asked.

“‘Daydream Believer’?” She laughed. ‘That’s your accent,

isn't it? Davy Jones.'

She had a good ear. And a commendable familiarity with popular music from before her time.

'What number is this, Jim?' I said, mimicking Davy Jones.

That smile again: 'Seven A.' A *very* commendable familiarity.

'Do you know "Both Sides Now"?' she said.

'Never heard of it.'

I played the intro. This was not going to be as stimulating as having her standing three feet away hoarsely asking someone to touch her now. But the Joni Mitchell song was probably closer to what her singing teacher would have recommended, and she did it nicely.

She had looked at clouds and love and had begun looking at life when a short, sharp guy in a blue pinstripe suit with red braces and gelled hair came up on her other side and stood there, radiating impatience. He was about thirty-five and studiously good-looking in a Michael Douglas sort of way. Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*.

I did an extra reprise of the final chorus, which he responded to with a glare and pursed lips in case his folded arms were not sending the message. As soon as she had sung the last line, he dropped a coin in the tip jar. I wound the song up and thought that would be the end of it. Gordon Gekko began to walk away, but my singer stayed where she was, right beside me.

'Do you know "Angel of the Morning"?' she said.

I hit an A chord and raised my eyebrows to see that she was happy with the key, which I guessed would test her upper

range. She responded by singing the first line *a cappella*.

I automatically brought my heel down to begin counting the beat. If you tap your toe, the rhythm stays in your foot; tap your heel and you feel it through your body. I felt more than that. She put her hand on my shoulder and pressed gently in time with me. It was an extraordinarily intimate gesture, given that we were not just in front of, but surrounded by, an audience: *I don't care if anyone's watching—let's do this, just you and me, and thank you for being here and on my side.*

The loud cough and dirty look from her minder said: *Play another chord and I'll break your arms.*

I played an E. I was in a bar in Melbourne, not the South Side of Chicago, and the pretty guy in a suit was no Leroy Brown.

He looked at me. My singer looked at me. They looked at each other. Then they walked towards the door. She still had a faint black mark on her cheek.

I should have just let them go. They were customers, and had done nothing to provoke me beyond the insulting tip.

It was, in part, a reaction to him pushing her around, and to her acquiescing, only a few minutes after having the courage to take on a challenging song in front of a bar crowd.

It had also been a bad day at work. I'd been dubbed Seagull, after a joke that consultants fly in, do a lot of flapping and squawking, shit all over everybody and fly out. I had probably earned it, trying too hard to make an impression that justified being paid three times what the permanent employees were getting. I was technically up to the task, but still green at the consulting game.



And there *was* the tip. Gordon Gekko had no way of knowing about my well-paid day job. I may have been channelling my late father when I gave him a Lennon–McCartney send-off.

‘You’re Going to Lose that Girl’.

They both turned around. It was too dark to read their expressions. I had to finish the song, to maintain the pretence that the choice was coincidental. It took me further than I had intended. They were both stopped in the doorway, listening as I sang about making a point of taking her away from him, yeah.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. In the end it was me who lost the girl.

*Hi*, said the computer screen.

*Miao*, said Elvis, rubbing against my leg.

*Mum*, said my phone, switched to silent.

One thing at a time.

‘I’ve got the results,’ said my mother. ‘I’m afraid it’s bad news.’

I knew her better than to respond with anything more than a neutral ‘It’s late in the day to be getting results.’ It was after 10 p.m.

‘I’ve had them for hours. I didn’t want to spoil your dinner.’

‘Oh.’

‘They couldn’t find anything. So we still don’t know what it is.’

An outpouring of relief that my mother did not have cancer would only have prompted a homily on misplaced

optimism, likely illustrated with a story from my childhood that I had chosen to forget.

*Hi* was still looking at me. A link to my past and a chance for a reality check. Nothing more than that. She was ten thousand miles away. One little drink couldn't hurt.

I filled the cat's water bowl and walked back to the computer. Claire had gone to bed.

*Reply to Sender.*

*Hi.* As my finger hovered over the mouse, I saw her again, standing by the piano, tear track down her cheek, trying to hide her nerves. Enlisting me as her ally: 'I just love your accent.'

Backspace.

*Ay up lass,* I typed.

*Send.*

## 2

As I was emptying the tip jar, having played through to closing time, Shanksy walked by with his bucket and mop.

‘You know who that was, don’t you?’ he said.

‘Who do you mean?’

I was kidding, of course. It had been a quiet night for young women with beautiful brown eyes walking into the bar and singing *take me now*.

‘Sergeant Carey from Mornington Police. Angelina Brown.’

My singer did *not* look like a cop. Why would I recognise a police officer from out of town anyway? And was it Carey or Brown?

Shanksy cleared up the confusion, which was due to my recent arrival in the country that had given the world *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. Carey was in fact *Kerrie*:

only on television are police sergeants referred to by their first names. Ms Brown was an actress, which explained the special reception.

‘Who was the boyfriend?’ I asked.

‘No idea. I’ve never seen her in here before. Not a bad set.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘You liked the Beatles song?’

He laughed. “‘You’re Going to Lose that Girl’”. Sailing close to the wind, mate. Lucky everyone else was thinking the same thing.’

Except everyone else knew who she was and that she was out of my league. I must have been the only person in the bar who had felt it might be the beginning of something. There is a particular magic when people play and sing together, and it had been there at the piano, along with the tease about my accent and the moment with the mascara. But my ungracious parting shot would have blown any chance I might have had.

Perhaps there was an element of self-sabotage. My move to Australia had been prompted by more than the promise of money and sunshine. There had been a relationship—my first serious relationship—back in the UK. After eighteen months together, nine of them sharing a flat and a cat, Joanna wanted to have children and I was not ready. Trouble was, I wasn’t sure I would ever be ready. I couldn’t put a date on it. It had ended with me catching a plane to the other side of the world. Now I wanted to work myself out before I let anyone else down.

Even if I had been looking for a new partner, I would not have chosen a well-known actress who should have been free to sing a couple of songs without being stalked by the

pianist. In any case, she apparently had a boyfriend. For all those reasons, I didn't do anything about it.

Angelina did. A fortnight later, she walked into the bar, alone. It was 6 p.m. and the place was empty. Normally I would not have been there so early, but I had asked one of the admin staff from work out for dinner, my first date in Australia. Angelina was indirectly responsible. She had awoken something, even if it was just my mother's mantra of getting on with it.

The obvious way to begin my date with Tina was with some special attention at *my* bar. We had come straight from the office, so I was in suit and tie, with my hair cut and beard trimmed for the occasion.

The absence of other customers detracted a little from the effect I was aiming for, but we took a table near the bar and had just ordered drinks when Angelina walked in.

She was showing none of the self-confidence that had fuelled 'Because the Night'; rather, the uncertainty that had undermined its credibility. She looked younger than I remembered her. She caught my eye, saw Tina and turned to leave. Then, one table away from the door, she sat down.

It took a few moments before I allowed myself to believe that she might have come to see me, and a few more to realise that this was exactly what her actions had signalled, right down to deciding that she didn't want to confirm my suspicions by walking out.

When Shanksy walked over to take her order, Tina said, 'Isn't that Angelina Brown?'

Normally I would have responded by showing off my

She was laughing.

I went back to my table and could tell something was wrong. Surely one look had not given me away? I had focused on Tina for most of the song.

That turned out to be the problem—and the solution.

‘Adam, that was lovely,’ she said, ‘but...wow. Just a bit heavy. I mean, we don’t really know each other yet. I’m just getting over a relationship, and I’m more about—you know—having a good time.’

Being taken to an empty bar and serenaded with a full-on love song at 6 p.m. was probably an unnerving start to a first date with the new guy in the office.

‘Hey,’ I said, ‘me too.’

‘I wish that were true,’ said Tina, ‘but it’s obvious you’re looking for something more. Would you be really upset if we just called it a night now? I can get the tram, and then it’s like nothing happened.’

I began to stand, but Tina stopped me.

‘It’s okay. We can finish our drinks. You seem like a really sensitive person. It just wasn’t what I was expecting. After the way you are at work. No offence.’

While Tina finished her drink, Angelina walked to the bar, settled her account and disappeared down the stairs.

Shanksy waited until I had paid—‘Playing one song for your girlfriend doesn’t get you two free drinks’—and allowed me to get halfway to the door before calling me back.

‘Almost forgot. Your girlfriend left you this.’

He gave me an envelope, with ‘English Piano Player’ written on the front. In another pen, Angelina had added

‘and friend’. She had probably just been planning to drop it in, not expecting I would be there so early in the evening.

It was a photocopied invitation to a farewell party for Jenny and Bryce, strangers to me. They were ‘off to England’, probably to live in Earl’s Court, work in a bar and save for a hitchhiking trip around Europe. Or, more likely, to get some up-to-date experience in database design so there would be no need for overpaid imports like me.

The party was accordingly themed Bring a Brit. It was hardly insulting—even a little more respectful and euphonious than the Bring a Pom that my workmates would no doubt have written—but I had allowed my imagination to run to something more personal.