Y

ou look familiar," she

says. "Do you know

Simon the Fiend?"

Natasha Williams is

wearing a black sun

hat with a badge that

says: "What if the

Hokey Pokey is what it's all about?" She has,

by coincidence, an interest in the profound

so she is happy to stand in Brisbane's Queen

Street Mall for 10 minutes as we mine our

previously disconnected lives for shared coinci-

dences and connections.

Simon the Fiend? I tell her I have an uncle

named Simon, an Iggy Pop-like punk rock

drifter with a heart of gold who I haven't seen

in roughly 12 years, haven't thought about in

one or two. The last time I saw him he hugged

me through my car window at the traffic lights

on the corner of St Paul's Terrace and Brun-

swick Street, Fortitude Valley. In this brief con-

nection with Natasha - a complete stranger - I

am reminded of how slack I've been at recon-

necting with Uncle Simon.

She says she works in a call centre for an

insurance company. I tell her my mum works in

a call centre for an insurance company. She says

she likes MacGyver. I say I like MacGyver. "Did

you ever fire twirl at Shorncliffe?" she asks. No,

but I did grow up around Shorncliffe, in

Brisbane's northern suburbs. "Do you know

Bec: dreads, hippie, stilt walker?" she asks. I do

know Bec: the dreadlocked hippie stilt walker.

"It's a small world," Natasha says, smiling.

Funny she says that. I'd been talking about

coincidences with Professor Derek Abbott, a

University of Adelaide electronic engineer and

physicist specialising in "probability; complex

systems; order from randomness". He told me

about "small-world network theory" - six degrees

of separation and the like. He said he could, if he

had the time, connect me in less than six existing

human relationship steps to an Inuit of northern

Alaska. "Everything is interconnected," he said.

But not everything has meaning.

I've been walking through the city, randomly

asking people about fate, connecting forces,

coincidences and commonalities. Natasha is

partial to mysterious ways; to the invisible web

of synchronicity and symmetry we walk

during daily. Coincidence, some are wont to

believe, is God's way of remaining anonymous.

Kenny Weldon agrees. He is sitting in a

high-vis orange work shirt on a bench in the

mall enjoying a ham and salad roll for smoko.

He's a 58-year-old labourer for Hutchinson

Builders. From his seat he looks up at the Chif-

ley at Lennons Hotel. "I'm a chef by trade," he

says. "In 1976, I used to work here as a chef."

He points to the ground beyond the hotel's

front door, where a flurry of workers are gutting

the hotel's insides for a $35 million refurbish-

ment. He worked here, at a restaurant called the

Colosseum, for about nine months, then moved

to Melbourne, raised two kids, fall into labour-

ing because the money in restaurants didn't jus-

tify the hours. He's nearing the end of his

working life in the place where it began. "Now I

don't get here knocking the bloody thing
down," he says. He gives a melancholy shake of

his head. "Waddya call that?" he asks.

Peter Fowke, 49, is rounding a corner into

George Street. He runs a small cleaning busi-

ness in Spring Hill, inner-city Brisbane. "I was

21," he says. "I was waiting tables at Prince

Charles Hospital. My wife and I were just

starting out. We didn't have much money." His

wife, Sandra, was heavily pregnant at the time

with their first child. They were walking along

the footpath at Lutwyche Road, in the inner-
north Brisbane suburbs. "And we're asking our-

selves, how are we ever going to afford all the

things we need for this baby?"

"So we walk maybe 400m further up the

road and a woman shouts out to us, 'Excuse me,

do you need some baby things? My wife was

really showing. She called us over. Her daughter

had suffered a miscarriage and she just didn't

want all the baby things around anymore. They

gave us everything, Cots, nappies, play things, a

whole room full of things. I had to hire a ute to

go and get it all. We had just been saying, 'Oh

God, what are we going to do?' I mean, I don't

believe in guardian angels or anything

but it's what it's...

Peter raises his shoulders, palms open to the

sky.

"Somebody has fallen on a railway track and

the train is coming and about to run them

over," explains Professor Abbott. "By coinci-
dence, somebody playing around gets up inside

the carriage and pulls the emergency stop lever

and the person on the track is saved. This has

actually happened once or twice in history.

Somebody, by chance, stopped the train. It

appears to be a coincidence. But that's not a

coincidence from a scientist's point of view.

You've got to take into account not just that

particular event. You have to take into account
all the times nutters randomly stop trains anyway. And it does happen and nobody is saved. That's the way a scientist would look at it. There's nothing magical about that. Trains get stopped all the time. When you think something is a coincidence, you have to ask yourself. 'Well, what are all the other things that happened that I didn't see?'

Marc White walks out of a Queen Street Mall jewellery store. He has just chosen a ring and is going to ask his partner, Emma, to marry him. Marc is a 40-year-old excavator operator. He has rarely created his destiny; he believes he has merely participated in its unfolding.

In his wedding speech, Marc will do well to thank his 61-year-old father, Alan. Three years ago, Alan was in Australia visiting Marc from his native New Zealand. Alan desperately wanted to visit the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary in Brisbane's south-western suburbs to admire some Australian wildlife. "Don't be silly," Marc said. "Lone Pine is miles away. Australia Zoo is much closer, we'll just go there."

Alan was insistent. It had to be Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary. After much discussion, the father won out. "So we hop in the car and drive more than an hour south to go bloody Lone Pine." And here, Marc first laid eyes on Emma, working behind the counter of the Lone Pine souvenir shop. He was transfixed, her beauty was so striking, the star sign doesn't mean much closer, we'll just go there.

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"Coincidence," he says. "I have a car. It's a big 1969 two-door Valiant. My grandfather bought it brand new and it's been passed down to me. He gave it to my mother when I was a child. That was her daily car. She had an accident in that car in the early 80s. Somebody went through a red light.

A few years ago, my partner's brother proposed to his girlfriend so we met her parents before the wedding. I was driving the car at that time and the [girl's] mother recognised it. It's a very distinctive car, a white Valiant with a black vinyl roof. And she was the one that my mother hit in the accident. She remembers it very well. That's pretty weird."

On the corner of Albert and Charlotte Streets, the song "Kiss Me by Sixpence None the Richer echoes from a shop doorway and, strike me down with a one-in-1.6-million-chance lightning bolt if at that very moment a man in a blue business suit does not farewell his partner by the pedestrian traffic light button with a single, tender word: 'Kiss!'"

On Charlotte Street, I search through the more than one million recycled and exchanged books in Dawn Albinger's sprawling Archives Fine Books store just in case, by coincidence, I stumble upon a book on coincidences. "Every single one of those books has a story," Dawn says. Each book, she says, might have been passed through five, 10, 100 people's hands in as many improbable settings and situations across the city and the country and the world. It's what Dawn loves about her job.

"There was a lovely old book from the early 20th century just sitting here on the counter. One day a lady came in and she was looking at this book and she said, 'Oh, I remember that book from my childhood'. She opened the front cover and went, 'Oh my goodness'. And in her grandmother's hand was an inscription to her auntie. She said, 'Oh, my God, this is my aunt's book'. She bought it on the spot and it went back to the family it had originally come from."

Professor Abbott has his own coincidence story. He was in his native London, trying to track down a long-lost and beloved high school friend, a man of Portuguese origin named Manuel. Something came over him one day and, fond of randomness as he is, the professor decided to simply drive through the city of London for a day and hope to come, by pure chance, upon his friend in a population of eight million people. "Something just compelled me," he says. "So I just drove around."

For three hours straight he drove through the streets of London until he looked at his fuel gauge and saw the car was sputtering out of petrol. He pulled in to the nearest petrol station, filled his tank and looked up to see his friend Manuel cutting across the station's oily concrete forecourt. "Manuel!" he screamed. It was a joyous reunion and the men remain close friends, because an empty fuel tank caused Professor Abbott to pull in randomly to the petrol station that backed onto the apartment complex Manuel had moved into.

"Have you heard of infinite monkeys on infinite typewriters?" asks Professor Abbott. "Imagine a room with an infinite number of typewriters and an infinite number of monkeys typing. They're just typing random letters. But every now and again, because there is an infinite number of them, one monkey is going to type out a Shakespeare sonnet. That's because he's
randomly pressing the sequence. Then you come along and you bring a friend and say, 'Wow, look at this monkey who can type Shakespeare'. But you don't show your friend the infinite number of monkeys typing nonsense.'

I sit for 20 minutes on a bench in the heart of a buzzing Queen Street Mall. The sun shines bright, a giant energy ball hovering over seven billion interconnected earthlings sharing a floating rock coincidentally placed not so close to the sun that our oceans boil and not so far from it that they freeze. The sun shines, the world turns. A man is rescued from a pool in England's West Midlands, coughing up a startling amount of water. His name is Waterman. Two women named Georgia Marshall line up for the Netball NSW Australian National League team.

It's 1973 and Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins agrees to star in a film adaptation of George Feller's *The Girl From Petrovka*. He travels to London to buy a copy of the book, tries several bookstores, can't find one anywhere. Spent from his fruitless quest, he sits at Leicester Square train station, on his way home, and finds a book discarded on a station bench. *The Girl From Petrovka*. Later, on set in Vienna, he meets the book's author. Feller says he, too, doesn't own a copy of his own book, having given his last copy to a friend who lost it in London. Hopkins presents his copy to Feller who flips through the book's pages noting his own scribbled annotations in the margins of the very book he thought was lost in London.

A woman approaches me out of the Queen Street Mall crowd. She leans in to my face for no apparent reason. "Thanks for looking so relaxed," she says. Then she simply walks off, "I'm just sitting with my brother," she says. "It's a miracle I'm still here."

I'd been thinking about Del Gerhard and January 9 this year, the worst day of Del's life, unbeknown to her, Trevor, a keen and ocean swimmer, had gone for a swim at 5.30pm, and was dealing with the shooting, unknowable to her, Trevor's drowned body washed up on Woolgoolga Beach, mid north-coast NSW, and her daughter's partner was shot in the head through a car window outside Del's house in Mullaway, roughly 6km from the same beach. As Del was dealing with the shooting, unknown to her, emergency services were attending to a body found at the water's edge. Trevor, a keen and capable ocean swimmer, had gone for a swim earlier in the day, while Del, a packer at a Corindi blueberry farm, was at work.

Amid the chaos that descended upon her after the shooting, Del approached an officer with concerns over her husband, whom she had not spoken to for much of the day. "The officer said, 'Don't worry Delia, we'll deal with this and then we'll deal with Trevor'. I just thought they were going to do a missing person's report.

An hour later, the senior constable came up to me and said, "I'd like to talk to you about Trevor." He said, 'I want you to sit over here' and I thought, 'Uh oh, something bad's happened'. I said, 'Has he hurt himself, is he in hospital?' He said, 'We'll just sit over here'. And I thought, 'He's dead.' In the space of an hour, their complex world had shifted off its axis.

Outside the A-Mart All Sports store in Queen Street Mall, Andree Hickey tells me to take a walk to Adelaide Street, the next city block along, and visit the War Widows' Guild of Queensland office. She says she'll find a quote there that will tell me everything I'd ever need to know about synchronicity and people and connecting forces in a disconnecting world.

Ann Orchard, the War Widows' Guild's community services officer, is tapping at a computer at her desk. She tells Ann that a stranger had told me I could find a quote in her office about human connections. Ann's fingers pause at her keyboard. "Do you mean: 'We all belong to each other, we all need each other. It is in sacrificing for our common good that we are finding our true life?' It's the Guild motto," she says. "Yeah, I think that's it," I say.

Walking towards Central Station, I pass a small cluster of people gathered in front of 81-year-old busker Giuseppe "Joe" Castellana, the Sicilian "King of the Zuffalo", playing an infectious tune on his light bamboo pipe that echoes across the mall. Castellana's tune sticks in my head for hours that afternoon: 'It's a small world after all, it's a small world after all...''

Three days later I am sitting with my brother, watching the televised pre-match entertainment for the NRL Grand Final.

"Did Mum get on to you?" my brother says. "No," I say. "Have you heard about Simon?" he says.

"Uncle Simon."

"No, I say. Uncle Simon is in hospital in New Zealand dying from cancer. Mum is making frantic plans to fly across the Tasman."

I phone Simon at the hospital the next day at 1pm. I tell him how much he meant to my brothers and me growing up. I tell him I love him. He dies eight hours later.