A high-angle, top-down photograph of a massive, dense crowd of people. The individuals are packed closely together, filling the entire frame. Many are wearing bright, colorful raincoats in shades of blue, green, yellow, and red. The scene suggests a large outdoor gathering or festival during a rainy day. The overall atmosphere is one of a vast, interconnected group of people.

SIX
DEGREES
OF SEPARATION

You 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 coincidences 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 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley. In this brief connection with Natasha – a complete stranger – I am reminded of how slack I've been at reconnecting 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 through 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 Chifley 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 refurbishment. He worked here, at a restaurant called the Colosseum, for about nine months, then moved to Melbourne, raised two kids, fell into labouring because the money in restaurants didn't justify the hours. He's nearing the end of his working life in the place where it began. "Now I'm back 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 business 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 ourselves, 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 *buuuuuuuut* ..." 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 coincidence, 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

**WE ALL HAVE THEM –
STORIES OF STRANGE
COINCIDENCES; CURIOUS
CONNECTIONS WITH
RANDOM PEOPLE. WHAT
DOES IT ALL MEAN?**

By Trent Dalton

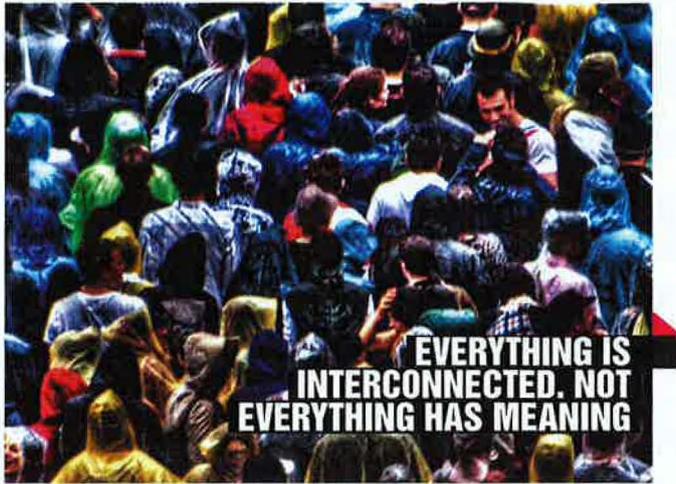
all the times nutters randomly stop trains anyway. And it does happen and nobody is saved. That's the way a scientist would look at it. There's nothing magical about that. Trains get stopped all the time. When you think something is a coincidence, you have to ask yourself, 'Well, what are all the other 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 to 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 instilling in him a courage that had not once presented itself in 37 years. "We smiled at each other," Marc says. "And sort of laughed a bit. Then I walked out of the souvenir shop. I walked out the door. But then I walked back in and went straight to her and said, 'I can't leave here until I have your phone number.'" Marc smiles. "Fate is fate," he says. "She's the most gorgeous girl in the whole wide world."

"We attach meaning to things," says Professor Abbott. "You might be chatting up a girl one day in a coffee shop. And you both have the same star sign. You say, 'What a coincidence, this is very romantic'. The probability that you're both the same star sign is not small to start with but if there was an alien from another planet watching what was going on in the coffee shop with that girl, the star sign doesn't mean anything to an alien. The alien would look at



what's going on and say, 'Well, why isn't the guy saying to the girl, 'Hey, I'm wearing a white shirt and you're wearing a white blouse? Oh, what a coincidence.' You have two people with a whole set of different things about them. One or two things will match because there are so many sets of things that match and you can make a big thing out of it. That works great if you're chatting a girl up but if that girl's a scientist she might see it in a different way."

Duncan Vickers is engraving another metal memento at his heraldic and general hand-engraving workshop on the second floor of the Brisbane Arcade. He spends his days carefully writing messages of hope, sympathy, encouragement and celebration for random customers. He can find himself within the space of an hour writing a message for a new baby born and a new baby lost. He's regularly telling customers they are unwittingly doubling up on gifts for John's 50th or Margie's 60th. Same person, same gift, same message.

"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 Feifer'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. It's *The Girl From Petrovka*. Later, on set in Vienna, he meets the book's author. Feifer 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 Feifer 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, blending back into the crowd. I follow her and stop her outside an A-Mart All Sports store. "Why did you say that?" I ask. Her name is Andree Hickey. She is a 63-year-old former radiographer. "I used to be surrounded by people who initiated interaction with others," she says. "The majority of people do not interact, do not initiate interaction. So we are disconnected. They wouldn't go past a person and say, 'Oh, I like your hat'. I wanted to verbalise something pleasant that I was thinking about you. You had a wistful smile on your face."

She asks me what I'd been thinking about on the bench. I'd been thinking about two text messages I'd received that week within a day of each other. One was from the daughter-in-law of a 73-year-old man named Keith Grosser,



An hour later, the senior constable came up to me and said, 'I'd like to talk to you about Trev'. 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,

who I featured in a story in this magazine about abuse that occurred in a northern NSW boys' home in the 1950s. The text said Keith had passed away after a long battle with cancer.

The other text message was from a young woman who worked in PR for Australia Zoo. She had helped organise a week-long crocodile research tour with zoo scientists in Queensland's Cape York, also for a story I wrote in this magazine. We shared the same flight home. Two days after we farewelled each other at Brisbane Airport, smiling and waving cheerfully, she discovered she had lost the ability to speak. That day, doctors told her she had a tumour the size of a mandarin squeezing the inside of her brain. "I'm going through treatment now and doing great, but will be off work for a while longer," the text said. Surgeons were able to remove the tumour. She has a long way to go but, she said later, "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, when, in unrelated incidents occurring between 4.30pm and 5.30pm, her husband 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, unbeknown 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 street 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 Trev'. I just thought they were going to do a missing person's report.

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 I'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. I tell 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 Zuffolo", 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. ●