

*Life can turn on a dime. A chance meeting with a girl on a train; a change of circumstance; a change of perspective..... the toss of a coin. Events are often unforeseen, and consequences, unexpected follow. This is a life. This is two sides of the same coin.*

## **Two Sides of the Same Coin**

by Stephen Maxwell

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# TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN



A NOVEL BY STEPHEN MAXWELL

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“Three, two, one!” Heads dipped, they went through the same repellent process, resulting in the same repulsive outcome. As Si’s eyes began to water, he downed another large mouthful of bourbon, trying unsuccessfully to mitigate the fetid taste in his mouth and throat. But it was of little use; he’d just have to ride it out. Speaking of riding out.....

“Come on. We had better get going, if we want to get to the TAB in time to put a bet on for the race” insisted BJ.

“Okay, let’s go then.” Si was still trying vainly to clear his nose and throat.

BJ cleaned off the remaining granules on the bench top with his forefinger and rubbed it around his gums; *waste not, want not*. Si meanwhile, hurried off to get his wallet and house keys, snorting loudly as he went, and still doing the same when he returned.

It had been agreed that BJ would drive them both, a fact for which Si was now supremely grateful. Having locked the front door of the house behind them, the two of them hopped in BJ’s car, and headed for the Forum.

By the time they arrived in the car park outside the TAB, it was about 10:30am, but already, it was absolutely sweltering. There was not a cloud to interrupt the clear blue sky above, and unhindered, the sun beat down upon the asphalt with unrelenting zest. It had to be at least thirty degrees Celsius already, Si guessed, or maybe that was just him.

In the five or so minutes it had taken them to complete their journey, the *E* had quickly made its presence felt in his system. His can of bourbon was long since gone and had been replaced by a two litre bottle of cold water, which Si had serendipitously grabbed from the fridge, before leaving the house.

Now, he couldn’t get the contents down fast enough, as he and BJ both continued to snort furiously, in an attempt to clear their respective sinuses. Having consumed as much of the cold water as he could manage, he graciously handed the half empty bottle to his friend, knowing full well that BJ would be going through the same persistent discomfort as he was.

They alighted the car and made their way towards the front door of the TAB. It was packed with people inside, all there to make their last-minute wagers. Even people who never normally gambled, took the opportunity countrywide, to have a flutter on this particular race each year. Today was no different.

This was the last thing he needed; a confined space, full of strangers, in sweltering heat, all of them, no doubt, looking at the two of them and wondering what the hell was wrong with them? Plus, there was the added ordeal of trying to fill out a betting card and get it to the counter, prior to *last call*. This is how it played out in his mind at least. The reality turned out to be far more acute than he could ever have imagined.

Just prior to entering the throng of people inside the store, BJ had suddenly decided that he desperately needed chewing gum, something not uncommon to people in their specific state. He rushed off to the nearby service station to acquire some. This left Si uncomfortably alone, to undertake what was quickly becoming, a seemingly insurmountable task; placing his bet.

The initial distress in administering the pill, by such an unconventional method, now gave way to the overwhelming wave of euphoria, with which he was familiar. Only, it was exponential to that. It felt as though he had to barge his way through all the other punters, but ever so politely.

“Excuse me..... Excuse me please.... Can I just get through here; thanks.”

After what seemed like a short eternity, he eventually found himself standing at one of the wall mounted shelves, containing small horizontal pigeon holes, each home to a different type of betting slip. Above these, fixed to the wall itself, were expansive cork boards, with all the various information one might require to place a bet. Okay, he needed a slip which said *Win and Place*.

“Shit!” he exclaimed under his breath. Was he seeing double or was it maybe triple; he couldn’t quite be sure. All he knew was that he was incapable of even making out which type of slip was which. He widened his eyes as much as he could and then moved his head slowly towards, and then away from the distinguishing labels in front

of him, until he found an approximate range of focus, at which he could barely make out the *Win and Place* slips he was looking for. Task one: successfully completed.

*Now, which horse was he going to bet on again?* He had filled out these slips on numerous occasions, in times gone by, but all of a sudden, it appeared to be completely beyond him. *Okay, one step at a time: the first column is.... is what?*

“Fuckin’ hell” he muttered under his breath once again. This was exasperating. *Okay, concentrate; again. The first column is.... that’s right – the location. Mark ‘M’ for Melbourne. The second column is um.... oh yeah, ‘R’ for Races.* Si gave himself a silent pat on the back, but for what he wasn’t exactly sure. *Now, ‘7’, denoting the race number, and then.... which horse was it again?*

He’d spent the whole previous evening, poring over the form guide for the race, before coming up with what he thought would be the winner, and now he couldn’t recollect either the name or the number of his choice. *No worries.* He would just consult the board in front of him, until he recognised it again.

There was only one problem with this masterful plan; he couldn’t focus on anything more than a couple of inches away. He leaned as far forward as he could, without drawing attention and tried to inspect the list of runners, on the sheet pinned to the board in front of him. But it was no use. All the words just seemed to meld into one another, and the harder he tried to focus, the less intelligible the script became. Besides, he was starting to feel giddy from the effort. So, in the end, he decided that he would literally have to, *take a punt*, and see how things worked out later, when he was more cognoscente.

Number twenty seemed like as good a number as any, and it seemed to ring a bell for no apparent reason. So he carefully put a pencil mark through the number ‘20’ in the fourth column. Then, without forethought, he made a similar mark in the *Win* column for *\$100*, leaving the *Place* column empty. *Alright; almost there.*

He was starting to feel incredibly claustrophobic and self-conscious. So, having completed the slip, he pushed his way through the ever-increasing mass of people in the store, towards the counter. Fortunately, most of those assembled, had long since placed their

bets and were simply awaiting the start of the race, in just a few minutes. He didn't have to wait long to have his slip processed. As soon as he had his confirmation slip in hand, he headed straight for the door, freedom, and fresh air.

But there was no fresh air to be had. The stifling heat made his head feel like he was diving into a couple of atmospheres of water, such was the compression on his brain. But it was preferable to standing shoulder to shoulder with all those inside. Despite having wagered one hundred dollars on the outcome, he now had little interest in watching the race live, if it meant going back in there. What he really needed was some..... *Chewing gum! Where the fuck was BJ?* Right there.

"How did you go mate?" he asked. "Did you get a bet on?"

"Well, I've got money on something; probably the Ambulance."

BJ laughed knowingly, understanding exactly what it must have taken, for his friend to achieve this normally simple task.

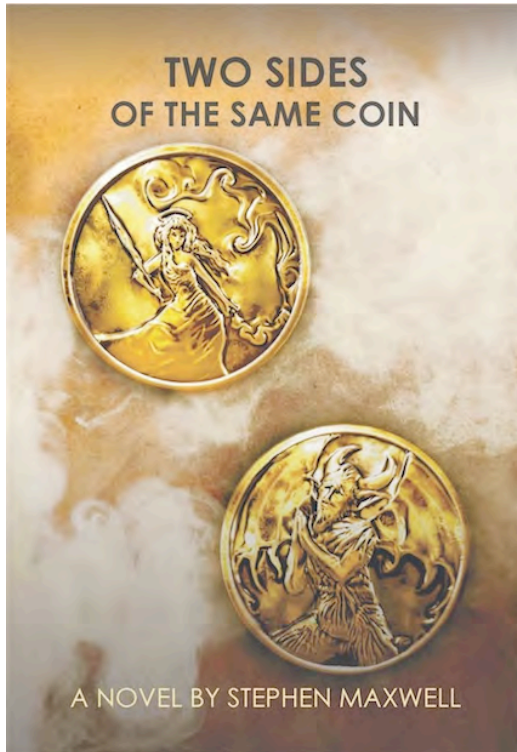
"What about you? Aren't you having punt?" Si enquired, realising that BJ must not have ventured inside yet.

"I thought I'd have half your winnings, if yours comes in" he replied facetiously.

"Not bloody likely mate. I tell you what, if I win, I'll replace the chewing gum you're about to give me." They both chuckled as BJ offered him a couple of the sweets. "Awesome!" Si exclaimed as he put them hungrily in his mouth and began to masticate furiously. "I was just about to start chewing my own fuckin head off."

The collective cheer of the standing room only crowd, inside the TAB, suddenly interrupted their banter, signifying that the race had started.

Thirty-two hundred meters takes a long time to traverse, even for a horse. So, for Si, whose concept of time was now warped beyond comprehension, the race seemed to last for an eternity. *Eternal*; that was the name of the horse he had wanted to back. It wasn't, however, the name of the horse he had actually placed his money on. In the wash-up, his chosen horse, *Fists of Iron*, had apparently turned out to have feet of lead instead, and ran second to last. Ah well, there was always next year.



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