

An aerial photograph showing the wing of an aircraft in the upper left corner, extending towards the right. Below the wing is a vast, textured sea of white and grey clouds, illuminated by a bright light source, possibly the sun, creating a shimmering effect. The sky above the clouds is a clear, pale blue.

**PATRICK
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**THE
DESCENT**

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Mister Smith was thinking about nothing in particular on the flight back to Melbourne when he looked out the window and saw a man standing on the top of a cloud. The little figure was a distance away but still clearly visible, and he raised his hand to wave at Smith as the plane flew past him. Smith craned around in his business class seat, free cocktails spilling into the aisle, trying to keep the man in sight, but the plane dipped down into the clouds and the view out the window turned to grainy white like week-old milk.

Everything all right, sir, everything all right? He stammer-shouted no, where are we, did you see that, *who else saw that?* as heads poked up all the way down the plane to catch this new in-flight entertainment. Smith babbled and yelled and no-one caught his eye or knew what the hell he was talking about. Eventually the oldest, sternest stewardess came out and told him *we just passed over the border*, no-one else saw anything, now sit down and shut up because there are limits to what even business class flyers can get away with.

He twitched and muttered until *ladies and gentlemen we're approaching Melbourne airport* and then he tried to get out right away but the whole cabin crew were there to push him back down. Finally the seatbelt sign went out and he was up, out, running right into five beefy blokes from security who wanted to know what the hell his problem was. If it wasn't for the expensive suit and corporate ticket he might have landed in a cell, but money talks and bullshit walks, and after half an hour of telling them that he'd had a funny turn and was better now, they let him go.

Luggage forgotten, appointment forgotten, Smith got his car out of airport parking, put it in fifth, got on the highway, headed north. No map, no coordinates, no GPS to direct him, just a need that wouldn't let him go. A need and a mobile phone that kept ringing, ringing, ringing. *Smithy, Smithy, what's going on? Whenya coming back to the office? Whaddaya doin' mate? Smithy, you better get your arse back here or you're up shit creek* until he threw the phone out the window to get crushed by a truck. What the hell was he supposed to say? That he'd caught a glimpse behind the mask of the world, suddenly realized that meetings and mortgages and *Australian Idol* weren't the limits of the possible? Like you could explain that over the phone. Like anything back there mattered anymore, or ever did.

Smith drove and drove, through the afternoon and evening and into the night, trying to zero in on that one particular cloud, that one bit of land still bearing the footprint of the sky. It was pitch dark when he gave up for the night, too dark to navigate or see the sky. He found a roadside pub, bought a six-pack and drove off at random, sat in the car, lights out, steering wheel gripped in beerslick hands, doubt

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and wonder and beautiful madness tumbling around his head, until it was all too much to think about and he drifted asleep.

When he opened his eyes the cloud was waiting for him, a frothy mountain at his feet wrapped in midday sunlight. The cloud wasn't like snow; it was firm and cool, like pristine white sand on an autumn's beach. He wandered up its inclines, grasped its ledges, pulled himself up its face while birds flocked past. After an hour or two of effort that was a pure and beautiful pleasure, he found himself at the peak, the peak that was just a hillock in an undulating landscape of cloud and sky and ill-glimpsed earth, all incandescent whites, brooding greys, frozen and delicate blues.

Smith heard a noise behind and above him and turned to see an aeroplane passing. He lifted his arm and waved to the plane, to the pale and shocked face staring out from one porthole, then turned back to marvel at more important things – the architecture of the cloudscape, the cathedrals and buttresses, cities lost and cities never-were, monsters and colossi that watched and welcomed him from imaginary, ever-shifting coastlines.

His back to the sun, the plane forgotten as it sped for the horizon, Mister Smith threw his jacket over his shoulder and wandered off to explore the dreaming sky.

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Afterword

'The Descent' was inspired by a daydream on a dull-but-short plane flight. I didn't have a notepad, so I wrote it down in the margins of a sales report. It's important to move quickly on these things.

Versions of this story have been previously published by Vignette Press (www.vignettepress.com.au) as part of *Mini-Shot #8*, and by Cambridge University Press as part of *The New Paper Windows*. If you liked it, you should check out my other ebook titles; if you didn't, well, at least it was free.

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