



Source: Suzanne Goldenberg, 'Billions spent on Iraq not enough to fight war, says general', *Guardian*, *LA Times*, AFP in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 27/09/06.

Tags: [discomfort](#), [fortune](#), [intimacy](#), [workplace](#)

Writer/s: [Tony MacGregor](#)

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I hadn't heard anything about Thompson for ages, but shortly after I got back from overseas, I bumped into a mutual friend. We talked about this and that, and when I asked after Thompson, she suddenly went quiet, shook her head slowly, and said—'Thompson fucked up big time.' My heart sank. I imagined all sorts of horrors. Was he okay I asked? What did he do? She just shook her head again, and suggested I ring him myself—he was still in his old flat.

Now, I confess at this point my courage failed me. I didn't ring him for a week or so. I just couldn't bear to ask him how he was doing. I wasn't up to the conversation. My own life was not so wonderful; I had heaps to sort out. I had to get back into my job at the University. I had to get my apartment back in order. Etc Etc. All excuses really. Thompson is one of my oldest and dearest friends. But sometimes it's too hard. Too hard to be a friend. I'm sure you've been there....

I finally rang him after I had been back a couple of weeks, one Saturday morning, around nine. I thought we could meet up in King Street for a coffee. The phone almost rang out before Thompson answered it, and promptly dropped the handset—I could hear a great crash, and Thomson swearing. He had obviously just woken up and made a desperate lunge for the phone. His flat is so small, you can make a desperate lunge for the phone from almost anywhere, including the toilet. He fumbled with the phone for a moment, and when we finally spoke he sounded hungover and depressed. I had that heart-sinking feeling again, but I pushed on brightly—'I'm back, it would be great to catch up, hope are you well, why don't we meet in half an hour at that place on King Street?' Thompson didn't say much—I don't suppose I gave him much of a chance really. He agreed to meet, but warned he might be a bit late—he'd only just woken up. And, by the way, he was stony broke—could I pay? Not a problem. We agreed to meet at 10.

Thompson finally staggered into the café at 11, by which time I had already had a coffee and read the papers and was about to give up and head off. I have to say, he looked shocking—he really was looking fat now, and he clearly hadn't shaved in days, his hair was sticking up all over the place. He was wearing a faded Nick Cave T shirt from about ten years ago, and his jeans clearly hadn't been washed in ages. He was also wearing thongs. It was like he had reverted to his student days, and indeed if he had been thirty years younger and 30 kilos lighter, it might have appeared quite raffish—the kind of look that implies

a night of rock and roll debauchery, with the suggestion you've just dragged yourself away from a horny young thing who will probably still be in bed when you get back home. As it was he just looked marginal, a cask of molasses away from the street. Thompson was not unaware of the effect: after a quick hello and a hug, he said, 'I know, I know, I look shithouse. And I feel shithouse too.' He was clearly hurting, and I didn't press him. He ordered a strong latte, and a couple of pastries. I told him a little about my trip, and we talked about mutual friends in London. He brightened a little, and I felt I had to ask, 'so tell me, what's happened? What are you doing for work? Clearly things aren't good...'

Thompson just laughed—briefly, the kind of laugh that I had never heard from him before—no self-deprecation in it, just a kind of weary chuckle with a nasty edge. And then he told me the story, the 'Thompson really fucked up this time' story. It was funny, predictably, and he told it with good humour, but at times he just looked unutterably miserable, and I just felt like giving him a hug, but didn't of course.

It turns out that shortly after we had last seen each other—just before I went away—he had actually got a job, working in a bookshop. It seemed perfect for him—he loved books, he read voraciously, he could relate to people who wanted to buy books. The bookshop was local, and slightly eccentric, but busy and successful. I really think Thompson thought he'd found a new career: he was going to become a bookseller, a gentleman of the book trade. But it went terribly, terribly wrong. He related the whole sorry saga to me. It was quite a debacle. Perhaps it was inevitable—even slightly eccentric bookshops on trendy high streets are businesses these days, not vocations: bookselling's all about margins, and moving units. You don't advise customers that they wouldn't like the new Grisham, or tell them not to bother with Joyce, they'll never read it.

I've got to go, but one day I'll tell you the whole story. As I say it was quite a debacle, by Thompson's own account: a fight, best sellers ripped up to prove a point, a display table upset. Thompson managed a real laugh toward the end of his tale, but I do worry about him. When we said goodbye, he promised he'd invite me round for dinner. He looked quite chipper, in a marginal kind of way, as he headed off down the street.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tony MacGregor.