

# All My Yesterdays

DAMIEN BRODERICK

*Author Broderick's early training in divinity shows itself in this irreverent, witty satire on about four themes, including immortality, religion and psychiatry. Like all his work, it is undisciplined, eccentric, gloriously individual, proving that if he had more patience with the medium Broderick would be one of Australia's greatest writers of science fiction and fantasy.*

*Damien Broderick has a wide educational background, including a degree from Monash University. His writing activities have included many items for student newspapers, one of which he edited at university, a collection of sf stories and one excellent novelette, as well as free-lance fiction and articles for most Australian magazines.*

Source: A Man Returned (Horwitz, 1965).

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"My advice to you," said the psychiatrist, tapping his fingers on the polished top of his desk while he stared at the voluptuous Tiepolo on the far wall, "is a stiff dose of fornication."

The small man shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but I believe in God."

The psychiatrist injected a healthy trace of scepticism and a touch of contempt into his benign smile. He was a florid man with painted toes and he smoked a hashish stick in a manner at once debonair and disarming.

"Are you sure you believe in God?"

"Quite sure." The little man was respectfully firm.

Behind his desk, in his huge wicker chair, the psychiatrist seemed lost in thought. He gently stroked a large phallic symbol with his thumb.

"Why are you sure?" he asked at last. "How do you know that your

belief in God is not the result of childhood indoctrination, or perhaps a masochistic frustration symbol, or even an expression of every man's hopeless yearning for happiness?" He was confident, brimming over with bonhomie, and the hook was twice as alluring in its naked openness. The little man was not deceived.

"I have lived long enough to know there is a God. He stops me from doing things I want to do. He lets me do things I don't want to do—His permission amounts to an order. Oh, I know He's there all right and He has forbidden fornication."

The florid man had seized the cogent point, and clung to it.

"Then you still insist that you are thousands of years old. Surely this seems odd to you. Other people live and die, and they never live much beyond a hundred. How many thousand years did you say you've been alive?"

Agony marred the little man's fine features and his composure swirled out of existence for an instant. He was a neat little man, and he did not look to be thousands of years old.

"This is the problem, of course. I can't remember. I can only recall flashes, not only *déjà vu* but genuine memories of times gone by. When I check my memories later against old records, I invariably prove correct. Sometimes more correct than the history books, as investigation has shown in a couple of cases. But I keep forgetting things. In a fortnight's time I probably won't remember coming to you but if I see another psychiatrist then I'll have an uneasy feeling that I've done it before. To tell the truth, I have that uneasy feeling now."

He shifted more comfortably into the air cushions of the couch, and snapped his mouth shut. It was the florid man's turn.

The florid man's turn was in the pregnant stage and it took several minutes to hatch. He did not waste the time. He sucked smoke out of the stick, dribbled it into the air, and ogled the Rabelaisian painting on the far wall.

"Your problem," he said, quietly, sanely, the wild good humour of a perfectly balanced individual skimming just beneath the surface of his words, "is sexual. Which is why I suggested a sexual remedy. You quite obviously hated your parents. This is nothing to be ashamed of. It's part of the evolutionary progress. Indeed I believe your Saint Paul advises quite

strongly to cast off the old man. In your case you have taken a path of least resistance and forgotten your parents, at the same time placing yourself *in loco parentis* by devising snatches of imaginary memories which would make you older than your parents.”

A lesser man would have sat back with a beam of self-congratulation, but the psychiatrist merely shifted his gaze to a voluptuously painted breast and chewed on his hashish stick.

The little man sighed sadly, and strangely enough the sigh did sound like a whistle of an ancient wind, dry and stale and sad across a couple of thousand years. He pulled himself to a sitting position, and was considerably buffeted in the process by the pneumatic couch whose internal stresses rippled the couch in an exhibition of dynamic forces. Heavier men had been ruffled in the past by the behaviour of the couch, and the little man was no exception. Flustered, he jumped on to the thick curdled-green pile of the carpet and waved his cheque book helplessly with one hand. The psychiatrist’s look was calculating, and a trifle tired, and he made no attempt to take advantage of the little man’s embarrassment.

“All right, then, you’re the paying customer.” The hashish stick had vanished, and the florid man peered over plump joined fingers. “If you don’t agree with my diagnosis, that’s your privilege—and your loss. The only thing I can suggest if you really are set against fornication is a spot of fishing. It’s the second-best thing for washing away those nasty pent-up pre-natal emotions. The receptionist will take the cheque. Good - afternoon - and - a - cheery - fixation.”

The polished maple door was open, the psychiatrist was standing beside it, teeth bared and hand extended, and in a scuttling moment the little man was borne into the receptionist’s office. Behind her desk she was wide and white-clad and motherly, and the little man almost waited to be picked up by the hind legs, smacked and deumbilicalled. His eyes closed, his throat moved convulsively, his signature formed on the blank cheque, and he fled.

Outside in the street the bright sunlight baffled his eyes. Snatches of incredible memories jumped in his mind, shouting a loud negative to the psychiatrist’s forceful facile answers. The little man was tossed and pushed by the eddying currents of humanity about him, but he was oblivious to the smart people and their towering skyscrapers and their ephemeral worries. Pictures, visions, sounds and smells swirled in his mind as the crowd carried him to the subway. Automatically he dropped his coin into a dispenser, took the token it ejected, and passed through a turnstile. His feet

took him to the 50-mile-per-hour strip and he stood submerged in the mass of people about him.

But he was not longer in the bustle of the twentieth century. The myriad worlds of memory stood at his feet, and he trod them like a weary disillusioned god. Again, he walked along the great stone quays of Byblos, smelled the exotic smells of spices as heavy-limbed slaves unloaded them, caught his foot on a huge roughly hewn plank of cedar from Lebanon, cursed as a sweating soldier butted him with the haft of a short spear.

He gazed across the swelling storm waters of an unpredictable Mediterranean, sweltered in the flapping shade of a great white mainmast, fearful of the straining and grinding of the yard high above him.

He sat at the crude table of a monastery refectory, daintily picking at his food while the vulgar oafs around him wolfed down their meat with their hands and belched after their swill of wine.

He stood in one corner of a vast, elegant, over-decorated Victorian drawing-room, listening to a dandy sweep delicate white hands over ivory keys in a startlingly poignant evocation of Chopin's Etudes.

The memories brought little satisfaction. In the blurred world of frustration and anguish about him on the speeding, creaking slideway, the little man gazed in unseeing misery. Ennui is a terrible disease, and the little man had been incubating it for several thousand years.

A large element of the little man's misery was his feeling of being lost at sea. All around him the short-lived scurrying humans dashed in their search for material comfort, clogging their minds and pores with activity in the endless race to submerge their souls. They knew whence they came; they knew that the dust of the earth would take back their bodies in less than a century. Their lives were neatly packeted, their three score and ten deftly notched with a programme of sublimation which would carry them from first howl to last groan with the minimum of spiritual travail. But the little man's world had no such handy parameters. It was a chaos of a hundred past lives, and a farrago of a million possible future ones.

Sometimes the little man thought he might be God.

Only sometimes, of course. He knew he was not God, because God was outside him and pushed him around. His thoughts of God were not bitter, though perhaps he had every right to be bitter about God. On the contrary, he was quite fond of Him. In the little man's colossal boredom, the

only pleasure remaining was to try to sneak a swift move past God's eyes.

It hardly ever worked, though, and the little man came reluctantly up from his sea of memories to look about him for an opportunity to put one over God. A man sat a few feet from him, on the floor, lost in a celibate intellectual orgasm. Mescaliners were becoming more common as the mass mind endeavoured to lose itself in the disguise of looking for itself. Further along the strip a tart in an orange and purple striped bedouinnighty caught his eye. She wriggled her thin body, and when the little man nodded imperceptibly she sauntered up to him.

The little man derived a sad beaten masochistic pleasure in the anticipation of what would happen. God had forbidden fornication and if God was on the ball as He invariably was— there, with a look of frightened non-comprehension, the little tart backed off suddenly and disappeared in a swirl of translucent colour. Something in the little man's face, something in the world, but certainly not of it, something an earlier age might have associated with burning fingers or floating Grails, something threw her back in terror. The little man followed her with his eyes, unhappily, and saw her break her leg as she stepped backwards on to a slow strip.

By the time the little man had left the strip and was making his way up an afternoon-lit suburban road, he had forgotten the psychiatrist and the thin tart had faded from memory. He walked up a quiet hill, a peaceful street of browned grass and old houses and ancient Scotty dogs. There were no children here to disturb the heavy meditative senile air, and the little man was grateful for that if nothing else. The great gables hung heavy, and ivy crept up the walls.

The little man was tired, tired to death, tired of life and the endless futile childish round of food and activity and sleep. He thought of the gilded Florentine palaces where he had slept, the nasal tones of Lorenzo de' Medici, the nickering rapier which had taken off his left ear and made him look lopsided before the ear grew back. He thought of the dust-ridden Californian ranch which he had helped to build, when only a handful of white men had seen the Pacific from an American beach. He thought, and he thought, and he remembered the beer he had not been allowed to drink, and the women he could not touch because they walked away afeared, and the money he could never keep enough of to be rich, and he was tired.

Finally, his feet were still, and he pushed his key into the front door lock and with a slight click the door opened. The house was musty, cool, empty and heartbreaking. The little man paused at the refrigerator for a glass of lemonade, went to the back room and brought in to the kitchen a

fine hemp rope. Between his fingers it felt good, rough and strong, and an inch thick. He looped it, tied the loop carefully into a hangman's noose, and held it out proudly to survey it.

The kitchen was roofed with waxed boards, and a great cross plank stretched above the little man's head. Carefully, he moved a chair over and stood on it. The other end of the rope went over the huge beam and the little man knotted it with delicate precision. He pulled it, swung on it, and the rope calmly held. He slipped the noose over his head, arranged the knot carefully behind the base of his skull, and peered for the last time around the room. But he was tired, bored, and unless he put an end to his thousands of years of life soon, he would be too bored to do even that. With a sigh of gratitude, he kicked away the chair and the rough fibres of the rope cut shockingly into his throat as he fell.

The rope broke, of course, and Lazarus skinned his knee.