



The Importance
of
being
COOL

Olwyn Conrau



Glass House Books

The Importance of Being Cool

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Brisbane*



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Please note that characters in this book have been conflated or converged to protect identities.

Contents

One	1
Two	13
Three	21
Four	35
Five	41
Six	45
Seven	55
Eight	63
Nine	69
Ten	77
Eleven	83
Twelve	93
Thirteen	103
Fourteen	109
Fifteen	115
Sixteen	121
Seventeen	127
Eighteen	143
Nineteen	149

Twenty	159
Twenty-one	169
Twenty-two	173
Twenty-three	179
Twenty-four	187
Twenty-five	199
Twenty-six	203
Twenty-seven	209

One

I WAS BUSY PREPARING FOR A BIG NIGHT OUT. I spilled the contents of the foil onto a mirror creating a huge pile of white that begged me to devour the salty mass. I sliced it up with a razor, drew a long line, put a straw to my nose and inhaled the lot in one sweeping breath. My friend, Jonny, put two large glasses on the plastic coffee table and filled them unevenly with tequila. The fringes on his suede jacket rubbed over the packed ashtray causing ash to jump into the stale air and land in our drinks. He skulled his tequila and poured another. I offered him the mirror. He grimaced as if disgusted or unsure but then changed his mind and held out his hand. I passed the speed and mirror to him.

The effect had hit me straight away. I wanted to move, get out, but we remained preoccupied with our drinks and preparations that would see us through the evening. A night out without props was like a night on the couch in front of a broken telly, boring and pointless. And just getting drunk only served to shorten the night. It also cost too much money and generally turned you into an uncool loser, something to be avoided.

I lit a cigarette, took a few drags, then stubbed out the half-smoked stem and slumped onto the floor. Cradling the glass, I watched the contents swim around, almost mesmerised. I made a half-hearted effort to clean the drink by sticking my finger into it hoping the cinders would stick. I gave up and tossed the murky substance down my throat. I almost choked on the residue but I didn't care. Enough shit pumped through my body for there not to be any point in my being concerned.

I tapped my glass on the table hinting for a refill but Jonny ignored me, too engrossed in the artistic manoeuvre of rolling a joint. I scanned the room to see what I could discover about him.

The room was crammed with little boy memoirs. Racing cars littered the walls. Framed certificates sat proudly on his dresser and bedside table, awards for various sporting and musical achievements. Posters of Hendrix, The Doors and The Church were stuck like trophies but peeling from the wall as if attempting to escape. Four guitars were lined up next to his wardrobe and fenced in by a music stand and some bongos protecting them from curious fingers. The only book in the room rested on the coffee table: a copy of *Generation X*. His bed was one of those old single bookcase numbers with a huge red quilt on top, suffocating it. He must have been at least twenty, maybe older. The man didn't suit the child. But unlike many I knew, his childhood seemed to show a promising adult life. But like me and many of us, Jonny was pretty much an outcast at school and probably didn't have any friends until he picked up a guitar and began hanging out in inner city dives, popping pills so he'd get through the day and dressing in a way that said 'fuck you, suburbia'.

I reached over the table and helped myself to the tequila, having tired of waiting for him to refill the glass, then I lit another cigarette.

"We oughta go soon," I sighed as I stretched my arms into a yawn.

"Yeah, soon. Haveta roll some more joints for later." He dragged on his cigarette.

"You okay to drive?" I asked as he downed another straight, not particularly fussed either way. I had nothing to lose. No cops to pull me over. But I felt bored and wanted to say something, anything.

"Sure," he said.

He snipped away at the green then mixed crumbs of nicotine into a china bowl. Cigarette papers were strategically stuck together and flapping about on the table, threatening to fly off. He placed equal amounts of the mix on each one then rolled them up, one by one, in urgent movements.

"This stuff is the best I've had yet. Really strong. Gets you off your tits for hours."

I yawned and said, "Tabs are better. Gear is good for comin' down."

“You don’t know what’s in a tab. At least this is organic.” He finished rolling the joints then stood up, placed his bong in the wardrobe and said, “Come on, Oli. Let’s go.”

I could’ve reminded him about the inorganic speed he’d consumed but simply grabbed my bag and checked for the essentials. Lipstick. Money. Tissues. Comb. Mirror. My last stash of speed, in case of an emergency and I needed a bolster. Every requirement for a perfect night out.

We hopped into his rusty old Mustang.

I’d known Jonny for a while. He was the best mate of my former boyfriend, Bax, who I’d split up with a month or so before after a series of dumb arguments over something I didn’t even remember. Just a few Fridays ago, I’d found Jonny leaning against the bonnet of the Mustang with a joint in one hand and a stubbie in the other. He looked pretty cool in his suede vest, blue and orange paisley shirt and stovepipes. He had light brown shoulder length hair cut in a style popular amongst 1960s pop singers but that stood out against the current mid-1980s gelled haircuts. His pale skin was peppered in faded freckles and he’d become much thinner than when I’d first met him over a year ago. So when I saw Jonny, looking like a model for a Rolling Stones album cover, I thought, he was okay enough to eat. But he turned out to be a bit of a dud. Mattress dancing wasn’t his forte. We hooked up last Saturday at Hosies and by the end of the night, both pissed as farts, we rushed back to his place and dived under the bed covers. Cold hands grabbed bits of spiked flesh. His mechanical efforts were totally uninspiring. I lay back counting... seventy-six... seventy-seven... legs eleven... Wham! Seventy-eight seconds. One minute and eighteen seconds. That’s what it took to make the wet mess that flowed menacingly down my thigh. It would take twice as long to clean it up. At least if we’d had powders it would’ve lasted more than a few seconds. But then, I’d probably have gotten bored and resorted to counting anyway. I just sighed and rolled to the other side so that when he returned to the bed, after a much needed smoke, he had to sleep on the offending wet patch he’d helped create. I fell asleep, thanking God neither of us had been speeding that night.

Tonight, it so happened, neither of us had anyone else to hang out with, so we decided to head to a gig. Far better than

being alone, or rather, alone with Mum and Dad. Not so good to be stuck at home on a Saturday night, watching telly with the folks. Besides, Jonny had a pound of green and half a bottle of tequila to polish off when we returned. And I liked Jonny, even if he was a dud and a bit of a madman. He was cool and like all my friends, prepared to be different and try things most were scared of.

We drove along the rundown streets of Footscray and headed to St Kilda; the Ramones' *Rock and Roll High School* blared from the cassette deck. I felt revved and excited until we turned into another road only to be greeted by a booze bust.

"Shit." Jonny cursed.

A man wearing reflective safety gear waved us over to the designated testing area. The car slowed to a crawl. I didn't think 'I just wanna have some kicks' blaring from the crackling speaker would help the situation so I turned the stereo off. The moustache-wearing officer from the Village People approached the car.

"Blow into it until I say stop," he said.

"Sure."

Jonny blew. Stopped. Blew again. Stopped. He repeated the action often enough to piss off me, and the officer.

"Sorry, sir. I have asthma. Can't breathe well," Jonny said.

"We can do a blood test."

"No, no. I'll be right," he said pulling out his asthma pump.

My left foot twitched anxiously. I crossed and uncrossed my arms hoping it would help him hurry up. It didn't. I pulled the sleeve of my top up to see the time. Close to midnight. When you're speeding, being slowed down was the cruellest thing in the world. I wondered how long the taxi would take to come and get me when finally he actually blew into the thing.

"You're over the limit, mate. You'll have to pull the car over."

I thought the officer would pull him out of the car but he simply handed Jonny a slip of paper and motioned him away from the testing area to where the other pariahs had parked for the night. Jonny edged the car to the side of the road and turned the ignition off. He fidgeted for a few minutes, rattled the keys and kept checking the rear view mirror.

“What are we gonna do?” I asked.

“Maybe get a taxi. Let’s just wait a bit. See what they do.”

We waited in silence for a while. I lit a cigarette and passed it to him then lit one for myself. He sighed. I sighed. Jonny turned the radio on. I changed the channel. Jonny turned it off. We shuffled on the seat uncomfortably, chain-smoking, waiting for them to pack up and go.

“Check out that friggin’ guy in the car in front,” Jonny said as he waved his finger in the air. “What sort of a person gets pulled over for drinking when he has his wife and kids in the car?”

“Don’t know, Jonny. A bloody idiot perhaps.”

“Hey, they’re packin’ up.”

Good, because I really didn’t want to sit there all night with just him and his bullshit for company. But then, that could’ve been the speed taking over. Nothing was worse than feeling higher than an aeroplane but with your feet cemented into the ground.

The booze bus finally moved on. Jonny turned the ignition, revved the car. It stalled. He did this for a good ten minutes before the heap of rust started up and we were back on track.

“You can’t get pulled over twice,” I said.

“Not unless you’re a bloody loser.”

I looked him up and down wondering how long the jury would be tucked away on that one.

The Screaming Tribesmen were playing at the Prince in St Kilda, and the room was packed and pumped. We decided to grab a cheaper drink in the gay bar next door. It was crammed with punks, goths and of course, gays creating an odd mix of paisley, velvet and black anger with tight pink muscle shirts and stretch jeans. Smoke and the stench of spilt beer filled the room. Jonny and I ordered our drinks, which took a hundred years, and walked back to where the band had just started playing. Because it was the same band I’d seen when I met Bax, I naturally searched the room for his leather jacket and trademark haircut. No luck but I shouldn’t have been surprised. These days, being a struggling student, Bax avoided gigs he had to pay for. I skulled my drink and tried not to give him another thought.

I found myself smack bang in the middle of the budding crowd as it jostled about. Hot sweating bodies convulsing to the rhythm. The guitar screamed a familiar anthem and the drums thumped violently. I stood like an idiot and swayed momentarily like a tree, but my trunk weakened and wobbled and I knew I had little left to keep me up. I headed to the ladies' toilets and waited for a cubicle to be free. It took ages. Finally, two girls tumbled out of one and I flew in before anyone else could. I sat, gagging on the broken seat, but in need of urgent attention. I pulled out the foil and a cut straw then snorted the remaining fragments, hard. My head spun and life powered back. I bought another drink, downed it and headed back to the band. Only this time, when I danced, my body moved to the music in smooth agile movements. My hips jingled and my arms swayed through the air weightlessly as the crowd gathered closer to enjoy my performance. Everyone wanted to be me. I was magnificent, the hippest and most coolest person on earth. And the drugs made me believe it.

When the band finished I went in search of Jonny. I found him in the gay bar. Probably been there the entire gig, for the cheaper beer. I ordered a drink and joined him. Some bloke had thrown up at the table behind us and it seemed he'd pissed himself. A dark wet stain travelled over his bright red crotch to his knee.

"Too much amyl, too much grog," someone said.

Poor guy, I thought, being left to rot while so-called friends partied next to you. Eventually, someone pushed him under the table and threw a coat over him. Better than being exposed, I figured. Most people wouldn't have even managed that. I sat quietly, sipping watered-down beer which tasted like what I imagined cat piss to be like. The speed had already worn off and I didn't have any more. I thought of going home but couldn't be bothered going through the hassle of finding a taxi plus I was moving into my own flat in a few days so taxi fares were a luxury in the extreme. I settled on staying with Jonny. He'd drive me home some time the next day.

"I'm totally wasted," I said. "Can we get going soon?"

"Yeah, no worries. Not much else happenin' anyway. No parties, nothin'." He smirked and draped an arm over me. Oh God, nothing else to do! He thought I wanted to have sex. With him! Fuck off. Suddenly he disgusted me.

"I'm really wrecked." I pushed the point, pulling my hair away like a tormented invalid, a feigning princess, the damsel in distress. I clutched my gut and wiped my brow. My best act yet.

"Yeah, yeah," he said with resignation mixed with great bravado as he stiffened his head and patted my arm, almost mockingly.

His disappointment made me feel culpable, but relieved. He nodded solemnly then moved his chair away creating a professional distance between us so that I felt like I was attending an interview.

I was already coming down and craved that joint to ease the shift. I worried too that as soon as I fell horizontal, my body would awaken as the remnants of artificial life pushed itself out. I'd be coming down for years the way I felt.

"Let's go," he said jutting up from the seat. I had to run to catch up with him.

Finally, Jonny and I were in the car driving towards his house. He informed me that his mum and dad had gone away for the night. Probably thought their absence would make me amorous.

"Fuck! Not again," Jonny hollered, checking out his rear view mirror. Panic crossed his face. I glanced behind and saw the flashing lights. I couldn't believe it. Cops. Again!

"Hold on," he said as he jammed his foot on the accelerator. I expected a speed chase so I obediently tightened my seatbelt. Jonny made a sharp turn into a one-way street. He drove recklessly in the wrong direction up a narrow lane before quickly slowing as if afraid of hitting something. The police car followed us, a little too closely. Jonny tried to speed up but the skinny road made it impossible for him to go much faster. He drove over the gutter, back onto the road and veered into another one-way street. I watched his face twist with panic and felt a stab of fear or anger knife through me as he edged closer to the row of cars on the side. I wanted to scream at him but instead I shut my eyes, held my breath and wished for the car to stop.

"Bloody hell!" Jonny yelled.

I looked up to see a high barbed wire fence waving at me. Jonny turned the steering wheel violently, forcing the car to an

abrupt halt. I could smell and see the smoke curling from the wheels of the car. I swallowed hard and tried to dissuade the adrenalin from exploding through my body. My hands shook violently. I breathed in, swallowed again as Jonny's voice crept into my thoughts.

"Great! A bloody no through road." Jonny shifted the gear, shut the engine off and wound the window down. I tried to conceal a massive sigh of relief. I turned to face the back to see two officers in the front seat of their car. Jonny just slouched in the seat. I thought of the racing cars on his bedroom walls and smiled. I couldn't help it. Talk about pathetic. Guilty as all hell yet he'd been too stupid to realise he'd get caught, again. No hung jury this time. We sat like fools destined for the endless rigmarole of more name and address exchanges and more lectures. That long dreaded wait for a taxi on a Saturday night appeared unavoidable. I mulled over how much money I had spent then realised I didn't have enough left to pay for a fare anyway. I hoped Jonny had enough money to get us to his home because after the earlier incident, they would confiscate his keys for sure.

After what seemed like an afternoon at a doctor's surgery, one of the officers finally got out of the car and made his way over to us.

Jonny squinted as the officer's torch lit up our insides.

"You know, you just drove the wrong way down a one-way street." I felt like reminding him that he had too but figured my attempt at humour would be lost on him.

"You're kidding, I didn't even see the sign." Jonny fibbed badly proving he really was just a naughty child caught doing something he shouldn't.

"We had our lights on. Didn't you notice?"

"Um, sorry. No."

The officer leaned into the car. He looked young, maybe in his early twenties which could go for or against us. I couldn't help thinking how boring his life must be, pulling drunks over on a Saturday night, traffic duty during the week and a few beers down at the footy club after losing yet another game on a Sunday arvo. Poor guy. Who'd give up their youth for that? He peered into the car and I gave him my sweetest and most innocent smile. He nodded his head and sighed.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"In Footscray. Just on our way there," Jonny replied with reserved confidence.

The officer walked around the car then came back to the window. "You had this car long?"

"Yeah, a year."

"There's a bit of rust. Should fix that. I'll give you a fine for failing to stop and let you off with a warning regarding the signs. Pay attention in future."

"Thanks and I will, sir."

I couldn't believe this officer let him off so easily. I thought he'd at least breathalyse him. But then, the speed he'd had earlier would have given him that sober edge that fooled pretty much every straight person. I mean, it wasn't a booze bust or anything so they weren't hunting for drunks. I got the impression they weren't in the mood for paper work. Probably close to the end of their shift. I hoped they'd realise their mistake and change their minds. I really didn't feel like going anywhere further with *him* driving. But they didn't change their minds and although the urge to just open the door and get out of the car was high, I remained stuck to that old ripped up seat the way those posters remained half-glued to the walls of Jonny's room.

"Better get the young lady home, eh?"

"Sure mate, sir." Jonny wound his window back up and turned to me displaying the most brilliant smug smile I'd ever seen.

"God I'm good." His admiration of himself bordered nauseating.

"Fuck off," I sneered. "He just didn't realise you were trying to dodge him. I mean, how fast can you go up a few fifty metre one way streets? And the signs *were* obscured."

"Yeah, right, Miss Pessimist. I had 'em totally by the balls."

"Yeah, right." *Wanker!* I swear, it amazed me how Jonny believed his own bullshit.

He started the car and we drove back to his place. I kept my eyes closed and fingers crossed the entire time hoping he wouldn't do anything to draw the attention of any more cops.

We virtually slid into Jonny's cute little boy bedroom. I noticed the ashtray had been cleaned, the glasses removed and the table wiped down. *Shit, his mother still cleaned his room!* She must have done it before her big night away with the old hubby. What a life. I considered the shrinking single bed that I'd have to share with him and wished I could afford a taxi. Jonny lit up a joint and I suddenly felt an inkling of kindness take hold of me. I could be such a bitch sometimes. He passed the joint to me and I took a long tug of cool then collapsed in a chair. Coming down without dope was life throwing you a huge reality check, that all brilliant things come to an end. And nobody wanted that, especially me.

"This *is* pretty good stuff," I said.

"I don't smoke crap," he bragged and that inkling of kindness escaped with the exhaled smoke.

"Who does?"

I pulled my boots off and dragged a blanket up over me while Jonny curled up in a beanbag. I felt too exhausted to care about his presence but prayed, please, please don't come near me and put your scrawny little arms around me but my body slipped away into a rigid slumber.

I woke to a violent sun pounding the room, and me. Even with my eyes closed I could still see its brightness. A lukewarm skeleton lay curled up next to me, but above the blanket. Bits of wire dug into my back, forcing me to move. I rolled to the other side to face the skeletal Jonny but his sour breath annoyed me more so I rolled back. My mind travelled at a million miles a second. I felt really tired but I couldn't stop thinking of all the things I had to do. I had to go home and pack for one. Prepare for a new beginning, my first home away from the folks.

I lay still for a minute before I pushed the blanket from me and bolted upright.

"What's up?" Jonny murmured.

"Can't sleep. Too light. I'm really feeling pretty ordinary. I should get going."

He sighed in annoyance and I felt sort of guilty but the urgency, the great pull to escape and get back to my cool, dark room overwhelmed me.

"I'll drive you. Unless you wanna ride the scooter."

He rose and pulled on a pair of bleached jeans. I shut my eyes.

“Do you want a shower or anything?” he asked.

“Nah. Sorry. Still coming down. Got a heap of stuff to do too. Gotta pa...” I quickly stopped myself. Finally I found the courage to tell him it’d never work. I said, “Jonny, I think it’s best if we just stick to bein’ mates.”

“Right.” Jonny sighed, grabbed the stained paisley shirt he wore the previous night and chucked it in the corner, retrieving a neatly folded shirt from his bedside drawer. “It’s Bax, isn’t it?”

I gazed at him for a good minute then said, “No, well, not really.” A bit of a lie because I knew once I moved into my flat I’d be seeing more of Bax and I liked the idea of us getting back together. I’d spent the bulk of my teenage years with Bax and it’s hard to let go of that connection. That’s why we remained friends. But I didn’t necessarily want the world to know what I was feeling.

Jonny disappeared for a few minutes then returned with a little spring in his step, his fingers plucking the braces holding up his jeans. I noticed his tee-shirt had a huge peace sign on the front which contradicted the neo-Fascist get up he wore. I realised then Jonny really was completely mad. Skinheads despised anything remotely associated with hippies.

“So let’s go,” he said as he skipped out of the room.

I perched on the end of his bed as I struggled with the zip on one of my boots, pleased he wasn’t angry with me.

“I’m ready. I’m ready. Just a sec.” I collected the rest of my stuff and like a zombie, walked to the car, got in and tried my hardest to keep the rising lump in my throat from materialising.

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