

## **Praise for *An Exciting and Vivid Inner Life***

‘The precise and steely power of Paul Dalla Rosa’s writing is startling. He has the economic grace with words that reveals the talent of a born writer. The contemporary urgency of his stories is intoxicating. I was seized from the opening sentences, and when I turned the last page I felt grime and sweat and heat on my skin: I had travelled the world. This is such an exciting collection – writing this good is thrilling, exhilarating’ **Christos Tsiolkas, author of *7½***

‘Paul Dalla Rosa’s writing is beautiful in its simplicity, awe-inspiring in its assessment of contemporary culture, and hilarious when you least expect it. Each story in *An Exciting and Vivid Inner Life* contains its own stunning world and its own cast of unforgettable characters playing out scenes that only Dalla Rosa could write. This book is a knockout’ **Chelsea Hodson, author of *Tonight I’m Someone Else***

‘I love these voyeuristically addictive, funny and deceptively simple stories. Paul Dalla Rosa has perfectly articulated the bizarreness of human isolation and human behaviour’ **Halle Butler, author of *Jillian* and *The New Me***

‘Reading this collection is like smoking on the balcony at a party with your funniest, smartest, most depressed and self-aware friend, hoping no one interrupts before he gets to the end of the story he’s telling you. It’s a precise and perfect depiction of a particularly current brand of emptiness and aloneness, and the places people vaguely, lazily search for meaning and connection without really expecting to find any. These stories are hilarious, brutal, warm and tender, filled with characters who are equal parts entitled and self-hating, ambitious and stagnant, flawlessly dressed and totally broke’ **Abigail Ulman, author of *Hot Little Hands***

‘How can these stories be so funny, dazzling, deep and dark? This is a sharp collection that will grip you with strange force; the people here are desperate and what happens here is harsh, but it’s always laced with wit and insight and the things we don’t want to know about sex and work and love’

**Ronnie Scott, author of *The Adversary***

‘Paul Dalla Rosa’s *An Exciting and Vivid Inner Life* is an existential prayer of a book that attempts to find meaning in a rapidly changing and absurdly disconnected, occasionally nightmarish, modern world’ **Oliver Mol, author of *Train Lord***

‘Engrossing, gleefully unsettling, curious but mercifully never whimsical, this is an eminently readable collection’ **Lauren John Joseph, author of *At Certain Points We Touch***

‘Constantly teetering between hilarious and heartbreaking, *An Exciting and Vivid Inner Life* is a sharp-eyed keyhole portrait of our disconnected and disaffected modern times, breathing life into a diverse range of lost, limping characters and touching upon the humanity in each one. It’s deliciously deadpan, often absurd, and painfully alive’ **Alice Ash, author of *Paradise Block***

**AN EXCITING**

**AND**

**VIVID**

**INNER LIFE**

**AN EXCITING  
AND  
VIVID  
INNER LIFE**

**STORIES**

**PAUL DALLA ROSA**



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**For Stephen**

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# **The Hard Thing**

I was living in Dubai and I didn't have a phone, a laptop either. I believed such things could betray me, or at least enable me to better betray myself. My father would call me on Skype but the calls would ring out. He sent emails I read later at work. They were generally the same. 'Answer my calls,' he'd write, and then he'd ask about my ex-boyfriend. He would list my ex's good qualities: that he remembered people's birthdays, that he was okay with my limited job prospects, that he routinely exercised. 'Most men are not like this,' he would say.

My father would also tell me about my future. He texted my birthdate and his credit card details to a psychic hotline that did readings on late-night television.

Today, my father wrote, 'It isn't great.' The stars indicated I was under the influence of an inverted Mars, which meant I could act like a body possessed. Unless I reconciled with certain energies, I would only ever know too late when I was truly loved.

'I think this is it,' my father wrote. 'I really do.'

I didn't find this as impressive as he did. To me, it read like an aphorism—it described most people.

The city was not what I'd anticipated. The air was either thick with sand or heavy with smog. When I first arrived I'd stayed in a serviced apartment I had rented due to misleading photos online. There were two small rooms and no windows. I could never tell if the sun had set. This was during Ramadan, so no one could serve drinks until it had. Every night I'd call the front desk and ask them: is it time, is it time?

I moved, but it didn't do much good. My new apartment, on the thirtieth floor of a complex that was built next to a series of man-made lakes, crawled with cockroaches. It had a kitchen, a communal bathroom, and a shared balcony the size of a shower stall. My room fit a single-size mattress and little else. Six people lived in the apartment. It's difficult to understand how.

I had come to make money and become someone else. I did make money; I paid no income tax, but my rent was expensive, outrageous, so I had little after spending on essentials. The company I worked for dealt in mineral rights. I used the company Amex card to book foreign nationals hotel rooms and to stock office supplies. I sent out priority mail and poorly proofread correspondence. Often all I would do for a day was stick little red stickers on contracts next to where clients had to sign. The documents were lengthy, in both Arabic and English, sometimes French, Mandarin. Like most things, I didn't need to understand them—I just had to avoid asking questions, had to get into a rhythm.

I'd sit there between glass partitions, drinking ice water, my eyes out of focus, my headache slowly dulling, and in this way feel at peace.

I was purifying myself, I thought, and so I rarely ate. When I wasn't working I went to the building's exercise centre and ran on a treadmill that wobbled and shuddered. I did squats on my balcony, and smoked cigarettes, looking out over Sheikh Zayed Road. I felt the heat. Most nights I descended the thirty flights and crossed the road to drink vodka and fruit juice in a hotel bar. Sometimes I would do small inexplicable things like smash a glass on the floor or take a late bus out to the dunes and scream. But I remained celibate. I was living where laws were meant to be moral. Sodomy was illegal, and so I figured my relationships could only be platonic. That was my idea: to exist as an ideal.

After seven months I met a friend for drinks. He was the only person I knew in the city from my life outside of it. He was the kind of friend you occasionally email but often lie to. I told him I had been here for less time than I had. Our drinks were arranged quickly. Maybe it was a date. I wanted to see if I could be a new person.

My friend was tanned and wore white linen. He looked ridiculous. He taught schoolchildren at an international school where he said the kids all spoke like movie stars. He told me that his students' parents often gave him gifts, either to influence grades or use local etiquette. He didn't know what to do with them. He was concerned about the ethics of it all. That's what he said: the ethics. He took a box out of his backpack and gave it to me.

‘Take it,’ he said. ‘I’ve already been given five.’

It was a smartphone. I put it on the table. I stared at it while he continued talking. I didn’t want to take it, but I didn’t want to give it back either.

He told me that a twelve-year-old had come to class that week missing three fingers. I gasped. I was already drunk.

‘Did he steal?’

‘No, it was his birthday party the weekend before. His parents gave him a quad bike.’

My friend and I were different in many ways. He actually knew Arabs.

I said, ‘That sucks.’

‘They were going to reattach his fingers,’ he said. ‘But they couldn’t because they were lost in the sand. The kids all thought it was kind of cool, though. But it’s awful. You don’t give a child something like that.’

My friend kept speaking and I was glad. The last thing I wanted was to talk about myself. I placed one hand on the smartphone’s box, still on the table, then the other.

As he spoke I felt further and further away. I was reminded of when I saw a therapist. I saw her for two sessions. She had me write my problems on cue cards. We were to start on something easy. For a week she had me think about why I found it difficult to maintain personal relationships. I arrived at the next session and told her that I’d had a breakthrough—I just didn’t want to have friends at all. The therapist pursed her lips and said, ‘You’re making this difficult.’

I realised neither of us was talking. My friend looked at me expectantly. I wasn’t sure if he’d asked a question.

‘I’d better go soon,’ he said. ‘Stephen is cooking tacos.’

You can come if you want. Give your partner a call and have him come round too.'

'Go,' I said. 'I'm going to head home. We have our own tacos. I'll be out after I use the bathroom.'

I didn't go anywhere.

Close to ten, I watched a group of Emiratis come in, wearing white robes and headscarves. The bartender looked at them and shook his head. They shuffled out and came back half an hour later in Levi's. They drank martinis. I did too.

At close, I stumbled to a taxi stand. When we pulled up at my apartment building I felt wretched and alone. I got out of the car and the driver called out to me, 'Sir, please take your shoes.' I picked them up off the back seat and nodded demurely.

All in all, I thought the night went well.

In my room I plugged the new smartphone in and watched a red bar silently blink across the screen.

In the morning I crawled across my bedroom floor. I'd woken up there, tried to move towards my bed then let my head rest. I listened to hear if I could sense my flatmates. All was quiet. I stretched, then rolled over and saw a cockroach. We regarded each other for a moment, then it moved on.

I got up and walked to the balcony. I did what most people do: I took a photo of what I saw and put it online.

After our breakup, and sometimes before, using an app, I sent photos of my penis to men I hadn't yet met. Times were arranged. My ex knew nothing.

Naked with two other men, one of them said to me, 'Doesn't my boyfriend have a hot cock?' and I said, 'Yes,' as it bobbed in front of me like a cartoon character, kind of nudging my face. The boyfriend, on his hands and knees, breathed into my neck and repeated, 'Hot cock, hot cock, hot cock.'

A petite Asian student asked me to pee on him. The windows of his studio apartment were lined with aluminum foil. I drank a large glass of water and he kneeled in the shower.

I did other things, unsafe things, that didn't make sense at the time and make even less now. I clicked 'attending' on an invite to a sauna party, then I went and walked around in a towel. The towel came off and I had sex with a man, then another, and another, all raw. The last slicked his fist with Crisco. He hesitated. I told him, 'Put it in.'

The next day I went to the hospital and recounted my sexual history. The nurse in triage ticked a box: 'Exposure risk high.'

My ex and I were still together in the morning, then we weren't.

Afterwards, for thirty days and nights I had to swallow two pills that made my stomach churn, until slowly I didn't have to take them or worry about that one specific thing anymore, just everything else. I sent my ex messages telling him I loved him. I also sent him messages describing the men I had slept with, and photos of myself reflected in my bedroom mirror, naked, in the position of an animal, the position of a dog.

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At work there was talk of a sandstorm, and then there was a sandstorm. The outside turned dark, a great and empty haze. It was still hot. I couldn't regulate my temperature. I shivered at my desk. I sweated. I looked at the papers in front of me and realised I didn't know what I was doing. There were rules, but I couldn't remember if I had them the right way round, whether a section had to be signed or if a signature there would make the contract invalid.

The director, an Italian man with an almost impenetrable accent, stopped at my desk and spoke to me. I thought he was speaking to me in Italian, and I didn't understand why he thought I could speak Italian. But he wasn't. He was just asking if I felt okay. I said, 'Si,' and then excused myself.

In the bathroom I sat on the toilet and set up my email account on my phone. There was an email from my father, the subject line, 'Last Night's Reading'. The body text just said, 'Do the hard thing.' I replied, 'What's the hard thing?' Then I looked at my junk mail and scrolled through an Abercrombie & Fitch advert. I rolled my shirt up and sort of pawed at myself, looking at the models.

That night I was in a hotel further down Sheikh Zayed Road. It was a kind of sky lounge, with neon lights and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out onto the waters of the gulf, islands under their own construction, cranes in the sky. There were some businessmen in boat shoes. A woman in a floral dress read a travel guide.

I tried to read but it was hard. I had to be calm, which meant I had to be drunk. I had only brought a few novels

with me into the country and so I reread the same ones. Instead of reading a whole book, I would read from the parts when the protagonist was at their lowest and in the last thirty pages somehow steps out of the narrative reborn.

I looked at my phone. I looked back at the book I wasn't quite reading then ordered another vodka soda. The woman sitting at the bar smiled at me.

I reread a few pages. In the novel a character travels to Sri Lanka and meditates with Buddhist monks. At one stage she walks onto a rocky beach, kneels, picks up two rocks and gouges her chest with them, then her feet, then her arms. Bleeding, she goes back to the monastery where no one says a word, partly because they do not speak. Eventually, with a shaved head, she gets on a plane for home.

I wondered if I had misjudged my plans, all of them, and then my phone vibrated on the table. It was an email. It was from my ex.

'I saw you're in Dubai. That's cool. I'm going to Europe but have a layover for two nights. Tips?'

I immediately replied.

I sat in the bar, then sent another email telling him to disregard the first email in which I said we should see each other, and then a third to disregard the second. There was a fourth but that didn't really say anything one way or the other. I put my phone down on the table, picked my book up, put my book down, picked my book up again and held it close to my face.

Someone touched my arm. I recoiled. It was the woman in the flower dress. She said, 'I love that book. There was a time when it was everything to me.'

I shrugged her hand off and got up.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I just really love that book.’

I said, ‘You should work on having more dignity,’ and walked away.

In my room I looked at my phone, and then, its screen glowing, slowly pushed it beneath my mattress.

For four days I stalked my ex’s Facebook profile, dry-cleaned my shirts, listened to meditation audiobooks, stalked his Facebook profile, did push-ups in the dark of my room, sent off contracts at work, and stalked his Facebook profile some more.

On the fifth day I saw he checked in to the airport. He was boarding his plane. Here it was 1 a.m. on the morning of a work function and so nine hours later I was at the work function. It was brunch, which really meant hours of daytime drinking and a buffet. Using the company Amex card, which now rested in my shirt’s front pocket, I had booked the function a month ago in a large hotel on The Palm, a man-made archipelago built for actors and business tycoons.

From where we sat on a deck I could watch the water, glittering through my sunglasses, and a helicopter pad, helicopters descending and ascending, men in white pants stepping in or out. Everyone was drinking guava mojitos, mai tais. For some reason there was also a magician. He just walked around doing tricks. Everyone from the office kept asking me, What’s up with the magician?

I wasn’t drinking. I ordered tonic waters with wedges of lime. It was refreshing. I thought, yes, this is what people do.

I sipped my drink then excused myself. I went to the bathroom. Everything was white marble. I entered a stall. I didn't know what flight he was on, so all morning I kept checking them all. I watched little glyphs of planes inch across a globe. My battery was running low. I came out of the bathroom.

'Can I charge my phone?' I asked the attendant. He didn't ask any questions, just nodded seriously and took it away. It was that kind of hotel.

I came back to the bar. I ordered another tonic water with a wedge of lime. I sipped it then asked for a small amount of gin. The bartender poured in a shot glass. I looked away. Then I said, 'Keep it going.'

I stood with our party. Everyone was drunk. Everyone was an expat. A woman kept telling the same story about a client who had taken her out for a lunch to discuss business matters. They'd sat on a deck, not unlike this one, but in a corner, at a small table. At one point she'd looked down and his penis was out of his pants. It was flaccid, she said, like a sleeping mouse. He'd smiled at her, zipped up his fly and left.

I told her that I loved her, and everybody laughed. I was optimistic. I was feeling good things.

I asked a waitress for my phone. It came back to me different. I didn't think it was mine and then I realised someone had just cleaned the grease off the screen. I hit the home button. My ex had replied.

I opened the email. It was one line: 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

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The sun went down. People left. I kept moving deeper and deeper into the hotel. It was like a palace in a children's story: each door led to an even larger room. Except it was different because they were all bars. I asked a bellboy to take me to the darkest, most expensive one. I had been drinking for seven hours. Sunlight and gin and something else streaked through my veins.

I looked at each man I passed. I looked at their face, then their crotch. I scrutinised the bellboy. I wanted to swallow a thousand dicks, ten thousand dicks.

I sat on a stool and waved the Amex card to the bartender. I ordered three peach Bellinis and lined them up on the bar. I drank them quickly and made eye contact with strangers.

We drank shots of Patrón. I used the company credit account. I slid the card over the bar and started a tab. We had more shots.

'You're in the navy?' I asked.

'Yeah.'

'The Navy navy?'

'That's what I said.'

We were in a kind of booth thing. Our knees were touching—they didn't need to be. He was built, broad-shouldered, and had good skin and teeth. He reminded me of a horse and sounded like a porn star. Wholesome, American.

I said, 'How about we go to the bathroom and I suck you off?'

'What?'

'I said I have to go to the bathroom.'

I went to the bar and came back with drinks.

‘There’s a club we can go to,’ he said. ‘It’s underground but cool. Safe.’

I didn’t want to go to a dark club filled with other gay people, so I said, ‘I don’t want to go to a club filled with other gay people. We can stay here a while.’

He said he wasn’t gay and I said whatever.

I finished my drink then drank from his. My knee was really pressed into his. I leant into him.

He got up to buy another round. I told him to put it on the tab.

I watched him walk to the bar. I watched him walk back.

I said, ‘You have huge shoes.’ I asked him to take one off. ‘I want to see how big it is.’

I slunk down. The bar was very dark but also lit in that way bars are—you could see everything. I slid beneath the table. I tried to take one of his shoes off but it wouldn’t come off. I was on my hands and knees.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ His leg kind of pushed me, hard.

‘I just want to put it in my mouth.’ I bent my face down. I licked the shoe. I don’t know how he knew when I was licking it as I was licking it but he kicked me right then. My vision turned white. A glass fell off the table but didn’t break. I thought this was funny.

A man in a vest brought my card over and told me that maybe I should check in to my room.

I told him I wasn’t sleeping at this hotel. I used the word establishment.

‘Then you should leave.’

The navy man was already walking away. A security guard appeared and put a hand on my shoulder.

I said, 'You are not my judges,' and was taken to a taxi.

In the taxi I vomited, first on myself and then onto the backseat window. The driver started yelling. I repeated, 'I'm fine, I'm fine.' I vomited again. He yelled. I yelled. We both yelled. He said he was driving to the police station, that they would deal with me. I screamed, I howled. He said he wanted two thousand American. I blacked out.

I woke up on my bed, fully dressed, my clothes covered in bile.

The Amex card was gone. I checked my pockets, then I let the fact settle. It was just gone. I lay there, taking it in, then my thigh began to tremble at regular and insistent intervals. I pulled my phone from my pocket.

'Hello,' a voice said. 'Hello,' it repeated. It was my father.

'Hi,' I said.

'You answered.'

'I did.'

I stood up, took my clothes off, and, naked, holding the phone against my ear, walked slowly through the apartment and squatted on the balcony.

My father was speaking. There had been a reading. He was describing a card, a tarot card. A man was on a horse. He held a stick or something like a stick. I took deep breaths. I looked down at the lakes through the balcony's smudged glass. There was some kind of complication, my father said.

If the man is flipped one way it means a journey, a destination. If it's flipped the other, a false start, stasis.

'Are you listening?'

'Well,' I said. 'Which one is it?'

My father turned quiet. Then I heard his voice, soft and frail.

'It's hard to say.'