

Dan



Peter



January 1970: Cornwall Park Ave, Auckland

I first met Daniel Gawn the day we moved into our new street. I was five, and friendless but resourceful. Setting off from our place – number 16 – I knocked at every door.

At 10, I struck gold: a mum wheeled out Dan, aged four. We headed straight out to his backyard to play. He had a black Labrador pup, Zulu, in a cage with a mirror for company. Immediately I began barking orders. We were explorers on Mars, the mutt was a dangerous alien and if anyone was going to die it would have to be Dan – but I might be able to revive him with our stunning space technology.

Dan eyed me up dubiously. We poked sticks through the cage at the dog until Dan's mother found us and sent me home.

I was back the next day. Within a week we were inseparable. Dan was short and stocky like his dad. I towered over him, which I rather liked – mostly he did what he was told. He did chores for pocket money. I stole coins out of milk bottles on the street. He did ballet, and later karate. I did nothing.

His dad was ex-SAS from the guerrilla war in Malaya; my father a veteran of a more gentlemanly conflict: the naval battles of WWII. Their family bought organic food; they drank water filtered through an algae-choked plunger and made muesli before

you could buy it in the shops.

His two older sisters were wondrous creatures, wafting by in clouds of incense and plaited hair, foot soldiers for the hippie revolution. I ate my first slice of Vogel's bread at Dan's house watching *Jesus Christ Superstar* on their video player. I thought it was all downright subversive.

We never hung out at my place. With all the tie-dye and bean sprouts, maybe things were more relaxed over at the Gawns. We played war all over the neighbourhood: stalking each other along hedgerows with deathly concentration, our hands hunched into the shape of a Lee Enfield rifle for him, a German Schmeisser for me. Two little boys with imaginary toys.

We were the bane of the street, digging holes under fences, charging through flower gardens, mangling wet washing underfoot, all in the grip of a frantic make-believe world of life or death.

My brother James told me Dan was a dork. He said any family called "the Gorms" had to be dorks.

"Gawn," I corrected him patiently, but it never caught on.

Then, at age 11, everything changed. Almost overnight, in the kind of brutal snap decision only children and dictators are capable of, I stopped going round to the Gawns. Maybe Dan was getting harder to boss around. When I was 15, we moved away.

1986: The Gluepot, Auckland

I saw Dan once more in the formative years – purely by chance – when I was 21. He was shifting steins at Ponsoby's Gluepot pub. In a genetic surge, he'd monstereed up, as broad as his dad still, but taller than me. Typically jovial – he was always easy to like – this son of a hippie mum and soldier dad told me he'd just joined the army.

Ironically, I'd already served three years in the army, but in the reserves – or "cut-lunch commandos" as my smart-arse friends liked to say.

I lost touch with Dan until 2009, when he turned up to my one-man show at Downstage in Wellington and we managed a quick catch-up. He'd just punched his 20-year service card, hung up his uniform and landed a corporate gig with Telecom. With his crewcut and bulky frame, his civilian clothes seemed an odd fit. He joked that his work stories had got boring, after exotic army postings to the likes of Angola, East Timor, the Sinai and Fiji during the 2006 coup. Dan and his new telecommunications colleagues did their planning in the "war room" – and during one of these meetings there was a brief power outage. "At least no one got killed," he'd wisecracked, and was taken aside and admonished for being insensitive. He knew he was ready to move on, but at the time we met didn't know where to.

A few years later he sent me some

TWO LITTLE BOYS

PETER FEENEY IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER.

Dan Gawn and Peter Feeny were inseparable as children. Armed with imaginary guns, they played war games all over the neighbourhood. Gawn became a Lieutenant-Colonel in the army and Feeny an actor, sometimes entrusted with a wooden sword. He tells the tale of two childhood friends who, decades later, find themselves reunited on a madcap film-making mission to Afghanistan.



Above: Model man Peter Feeney at a 1989 Melbourne photoshoot; and (at right) in costume for his role in the 2001 TV series *Matak*.

shots of him at Kandahar Air Force base in Afghanistan and told me he was working for Supreme Fuels, running fuel for the American military.

I sent him a brief reply – shaking my head at his appetite for danger – and that was it.

February 20, 2012: Auckland to Dubai

Years later, I'm strolling along Castor Bay on Auckland's North Shore; just another dad bent with cares. Well, I have my baby Tilly in a backpack, so I'm slightly more bent. Tilly's my third. Our children seem to have a magical, inverse relationship to money: the more we have, the less I earn. My phone rings. It's the last person in the world I would have expected.

Dan, from Dubai, clears his throat: "How are you, Mr Producer?"

This is rather a stretch from under-employed actor. I start correcting him when he interrupts: "Here's one for you to ponder..."

He's got my number from my website and he has an idea for a television documentary series. He proceeds to pitch: every week we pick a different person – an anti-piracy security guy, a mine clearer, humanitarian worker, doctor, UN worker. We watch them fly out of Dubai's tatty Terminal 2 to the kind of destinations you normally read about in a *Tintin* comic: Kabul, Kandahar, Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Mogadishu, Khartoum. Then we follow them around for a week while they do their crazy, dangerous work. "So," he concludes, "wanna make it with me?"

Objections explode in my brain like cluster munitions: "Dan, ideas are cheap. These things are a lot of work. I wouldn't know where to start. I'm an actor. You need to talk to a producer. I don't want to die."

Then he says the four magic words: "I have an investor."

Looking back, if I'd known how convoluted, frustrating and time-

consuming this enterprise would become, I might well have run a mile right then. Instead, I remember my bank balance. My acting instinct kicks in. I lift my sagging shoulders. "Sure, Dan," I tell him, "you've come to the right place. Let's do it."

So Dan enters my life again. Oddly, we're back on the same page – both in our late 40s, groping for new directions, trusting to an ancient bond of mateship we hope has somehow stood the test of time. For now, the documentary's the thing.

February 21 to November 7, 2012: Development Land

We have an idea for a documentary, but I have no idea how to make one. I spend days pulling figures out of my bottom, producing budgets to convince Afghan entrepreneur Fawad Al Dost – the investor – to part with his money. He wants a 10 per cent return on his investment. Or is it 20 per cent?



Dan Gawn (at right), with bodyguard ("meatshield") outside the Kandahar airstrip in Afghanistan.

I can get my head around the idea of producing a pilot episode of the show, which I imagine involves me hiring the right people and making them coffee while they do the actual work. But how do I know, after spending \$150,000 of someone else's money, that a network will be interested in the result? And how do I go about selling it to them?

Good-sort John Harris from Greenstone Pictures gives freely of his advice but it comes at a price – a terrifying glimpse into a strange world teeming with sales agents, international broadcasters, media markets and backroom deals. Who am I kidding?

I decide we need help. Dan and his ex-army partner in crime, J.J. Smith, keep researching till we have documented about a dozen demented individuals who do interesting jobs in scary places. I pull in Donny Duncan, top Auckland director of photography and all-round nice guy, to advise me on all things practical in film-land.

Finally, about four months and a thousand emails after Dan's original phone call, my pitch document has been worked up to a fever and I fire it blind at Neil Harraway, head of development at Natural History New Zealand.

NHNZ is a prestigious international company; I figure we start at the top and slide our way down. Nervously, I request their participation as consulting producers to help us make and sell a pilot of our doco. We feel we have a trump card: we want their expertise, not their money.

A few days later, Neil's back with a

counter-offer. The sun's streaming in the French doors as I open the email. They love the idea and offer a co-production deal. I can't stop smiling all day. It's like searching for a needle in a haystack and finding the farmer's daughter.

A week after our doco deal is struck, NHNZ tells us we don't need Fawad: if we can convince a broadcaster to run with the idea then they'll fund it. So we ready ourselves to pitch to networks. From Dubai, Dan and J.J. fire me more potential subjects (eventually we get to 20, of all nationalities).

NHNZ tweaks and tinkers with our proposal. They reject the title *Terminal 2* because everyone thinks it's an airport show. We all kick around *Expats on the Edge* (too corny) and *DangerMen/DangerWomen* (too gender-exclusive). We plumb the depths with *Killer Careers* (too reality TV). At last, Dan and I settle on *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Madmen*. Then my wife, Nicola, dreams up *DangerLands*, which Neil and the NHNZ team jump on. Phew.

Neil pitches to TVNZ over a cocktail at the global TV market at Cannes. They turn down the show. Al Jazeera does the same.

He then jets off to London where he drums up enough interest from other quarters to justify going the next step. NHNZ writes a cheque for the princely sum of \$5000 for me to go to Afghanistan and shoot a teaser.

Simultaneously, I find out that ex-TVNZ journo Kim Vinnell is in Africa; she comes on board, agreeing to research and

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Peter Feeney (centre) lines up with Fawad Al Dost's bodyguards and office staff outside the Afghan entrepreneur's Kabul compound.

children. A clutch of daredevil escapades denied him promotion so at one time he was the most senior 2nd Lieutenant in the army. He then spent eight years at the rank of captain before leaping up the promotion ladder, reaching lieutenant-colonel in his 17th year of service.

After his Telecom NZ stint, he was headhunted by Supreme Fuels to work in Afghanistan, supplying fuel to the American military. There he befriended Fawad, and together they ran tankers through Taliban attacks from Pakistan over the border and all over the 'stan. Dan was on salary, and did okay; Fawad became a squillionaire.

While Dan was clawing his way up the army chain of command, I had remained unsure of my direction, travelling and doing odd jobs – including modelling – until I settled on an honours degree in politics at the University of Melbourne.

Postgrad study took me to Russia. In St Petersburg, 27 years young but feeling much older, alone in a seedy hotel room (if you don't count the empty half-litre bottle of vodka), I contemplated an incinerated existence. Just ditched by my girlfriend, my master's thesis had also been inconsiderately scuppered by the fall of communism.

I tried to think of possible professions: teacher, writer, surgeon – until it hit me: I can do all of them with a gig called

acting. I'd always secretly wanted to do it but lacked the confidence, thinking it was only for other, more exalted people. Perversely at this moment, the nadir of my existence when I had nothing to lose, I finally found the courage to give it a crack.

I started off in theatre and small guest roles in overpaid American cable TV such as *Xena* and *Hercules*. After five years my decision paid off: I got cast as a lead in an Australian mini-series. The same year my first book, a novel called *Blind Bitter Happiness*, was published by HarperCollins. I tried my hand at casting, writing, directing and teaching. A late starter at everything, I married at 41.

Some of this manic activity had filtered through into popular consciousness. Dan told me he'd caught a few films of mine over the years, including *Black Sheep* – the 2007 Kiwi zombie-sheep comedy in which I play the sinister Angus, whose genetic experiments aim to transform placid herbivores into vicious carnivores, and who's not above shagging the odd sheep to help things along.

I burst out laughing when Dan tells me he holds my profession in some awe. It's too ironic. I hold his life in awe. He's the real thing. The easygoing follower of my childhood has become the steely leader of men.

In contrast, after years of playing

the goat, farting about in tights on stages or swinging swords on sound-sets, I feel hopelessly ill-equipped for our upcoming foray to a war zone.

I pretend life and death for a living. He's been there, done that.

November 14-24: Kabul

Our Afghan escapade starts with Kabul: smog, cars, dust, honking horns, Bollywood tunes, burqas and bikers. Five million people packed into a city built for a tenth that number. I love it.

My first night, staying in Fawad's house, I wake to a popping noise – a Taliban rocket, I'm told later by Chris Carter, former Labour Cabinet minister-turned-director of the UN's Governance Unit in Kabul, while sipping the worst coffee ever brewed at the Intercontinental. But Dan's the light sleeper; the packs of rabid hounds that own the Kabul streets at night have roused him even earlier with their baying. I sleep through almost anything, but the army has taught him to wake at the smallest sound – except, his wife tells me later, a crying baby.

Afghanistan is awash with history, poverty and guns. The government is a corrupt and tottering edifice propped up by aid. Sitting astride the strategic silk route, this country has

been invaded by everyone forever, most lately the Americans in their collective moment of madness post-9/11.

But never mind the rockets, the traffic in Kabul is the real killer – I'd bet good money there's no such thing as an Afghan driving test – and if a beaten-up Ford utility doesn't get you, the air pollution will. In 2007, it's bad enough to result in an "excess annual mortality" of 2287 people – that's twice as many civilians who died that same year in the war.

Sure enough, a week into my stay I get the Kabul cough. "A large part of the dust is fecal matter, Pete, donkey dung and so on," Dan informs me sagely. I stop picking my nose immediately. It's only later I discover this widely held belief is an urban legend. Maybe Dan was pulling my leg... in any case the dust is like chalk, it gets everywhere. My hands become wrinkly and white, like an albino tuatara. They never sweat, no matter what the heat.

We race all over the place, talking up the doco and pointing my camera at anyone who doesn't point a rifle back. Childhood friends, once we get on the

road we're more like an old married couple. I'm waffly, roundabout and quite enjoy the odd moan. Dan's blunt, direct, uncomplaining – and full of jargon. When I won't give up on an elusive subject he reproaches me for ECTAFCOA – escalating commitment to a failing course of action.

You can't argue with that.

One afternoon we're outside a provincial airport, sitting on our bags waiting interminably for our turn to be searched. Dan draws three concentric circles in the dirt: influence, concern, other shit. "In a war zone, Pete," he drawls, "you learn fast that your circle of influence is very small."

Whenever we pack out, I've never seen a room's sprawl transformed faster into a carry-all. He's out the door while I'm still trying to find my toilet bag.

However, as Russian writer Dostoyevsky observed, it's easier to die on the cross for humanity than share a cabin overnight with a man with a cough. No longer my junior, Dan's impatient about having to explain simple procedures twice. With a familiar air of command, he'll be running

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through the next day's itinerary when my mind drifts for a moment – only barely resisting the urge to strangle me when I ask him if he can just repeat that last bit...

But Dan gets really angry with me only once, after I attract a crowd by handing out felt-tip pens to a flock of children tailing us on Chicken St. He didn't mind me risking my own neck, he tells me later, but I was also unnecessarily making

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our bodyguards and him a target.

Nevertheless, his zero-risk stance to security drives me nuts. I can't stand being locked up all the time, then whisked away suddenly in an armoured SUV. Why can't I just walk down the road and buy a banana? Patiently, he tells me: "I've survived decades in conflict zones for a reason – I'm careful." I obey. This is his turf, and there's one legacy it seems from our years of dodging imaginary bullets in the burbs: we trust each other. And I get my own back on a Kabul street next day: I'm walking backwards filming, he fails to wrangle me properly, and I trip on a kerb and fall over.

Anyway, by the time we get to Kandahar later in the trip I'm not tempted to go shopping in a souk for bananas or anything else: the feeling of danger is visceral. White faces are not welcome here.

Dan is unfazed by our wee run-ins. He has a serving of Kentucky Fried Management wisdom for every occasion. "We're forming, storming and norming," he tells me one day, by way of apology for halting my early morning stream of chatter with a "Shut the fuck up please till I have my coffee!"

His politics lean to the right, but he's a lifetime contributor to Greenpeace thanks to, he tells me, all that time spent in Third World countries. He expresses pride that as a soldier and peacekeeper he'd taken on bullies and helped those affected by them. Dan also gets on with most everyone, from the Bangladeshi national pumping his gas in Dubai to a five-star general at International Security Assistance Force HQ in Kabul. He treats all of them exactly the same way: with respect.

He still plays rugby at 47 and wins hands-down a press-up competition with some Kiwi squaddies half his age at Bagram Air Force base. A hard man, he's also hard to pigeonhole. But who cares because we're also a great team, alternating as hard cop and soft cop, having a ball as we schmooze a rag-tag succession of motley adventurers, trying to convince them to let us film their classified, or commercially sensitive, or just plain dodgy goings-on.

One time we get run out of a walled compound by a suspicious ex-CIA operative with an insane glint in his eye – swimming in communist conspiracy theory for too long will do that to you. On the dusty street we find ourselves *sans* bodyguards – who have driven up the road in search of



Ex-SAS Commanding Officer Richard Williams (left) in the Hindu Kush with his prospecting team of geologists, miners and former soldiers, including ex-Royal Fusiliers officer Andrew (centre).

One legacy from our years of dodging imaginary bullets in the burbs: we trust each other.

a green tea – which is unnerving.

So it is that a week into *Peter in Wonderland*, Dan and I find ourselves washed up in the restaurant of expat hang-out, the International Club. We're here to meet Chris Carter's chief of staff.

Earlier that day we'd been bumped off the weekly RNZAF flight to Bamiyan. There we'd planned to film Kiwi engineer Tony Woods bringing solar energy to 2500 homes – their first electricity in 5000 years of human habitation in the remote, mountain-fringed region. This was bad news. We'd met some interesting people but for reasons of security, safety or confidentiality had not been able to film them doing anything interesting. Tony had become our great white hope. I remind Dan if we don't capture some interesting footage soon the whole trip could be a fizzer.

We sip our overpriced Heinekens and

peruse an insanely ambitious menu. It offers dishes embracing every cooking tradition on the planet: there's either a squad of Gordon Ramsays in the kitchen or one very imaginative egomaniac. After a dinner of sushi, toasted sandwiches and steak we sojourn to the bar, empty except for a tall blond man in the corner. Dressed in a sheepskin bomber jacket, he looks like an oversize character out of a Biggles book. What attracts my attention though is his face: he's wind-burned.

"That guy's been out in the bush," I say. "He might have a story."

"Anyone who comes into a bar on their own is looking for company," says Dan.

Propelled by hope and desperation in equal measure, we introduce ourselves. Andrew turns out to be affable and talkative – more evidence that he's been in the field too long with people who don't speak English. He's an ex-Royal Fusiliers officer, recently retired after 12 years of almost non-stop fighting for Queen and country.

We tell him we're in the country to scope ideas for a documentary series. He tells us the work he's doing could fire up a dozen. We shout him beers but he's cagey on the details: loose lips sink ships and all that... Finally he heads back to his compound across the road, assuring us he'll mention us to his boss and return later. Now the place is deserted, but for us. We're the lepers of Kabul.

"We won't see him again," says Dan. I agree.

The night is not boding well. It's



Feeney (at right), posing in blazingly non-PC fashion, at Fawad Al Dost's Kabul office compound with bodyguard, Nasir.

getting late and it looks like Carter's chief of staff has stood us up. We order up our car and settle in, somewhat despondently, to wait. Then, as promised, Andrew walks back into the bar. We couldn't be more surprised.

With him are Devin and Keith, two burly South Africans – though Andrew, an ex-UK representative rugby player it turns out – still towers over all of us. We learn that these guys are prospecting for minerals – in a war zone. This gets our attention. But I know we've struck gold when their boss, Richard Williams, strolls in an hour later. In this moment our prospects are transformed and we have a potential TV series.

Richard, till recently commanding officer of the British 22nd SAS Regiment, is funny, over-educated, supremely intelligent, razor-sharp, no stranger to risks, and a man who (we discover later) the camera loves.

Over a pint, he gives Dan and me a geopolitical rundown on Afghanistan. About 70 per cent of Afghans, he tells us, are under 25. All they've known in adult life is the allied intervention. They have little affinity with the Taliban.

Everyone here agrees that since 2001 a lot has been done wrong, but Richard maintains a lot has been done right too. There are 18 million cellphone subscribers out of a total population of around 31 million (the figures for Burma, he reels off, are just two million cellphones for an estimated 60 million people). He quotes T.E. Lawrence: "The transistor radio is the biggest enemy of the tribal system."

Intelligence indicates that the Taliban want a voice in any post-2014 settlement, he says, but no longer seek to be the dominant one. Richard is positive about

the Afghans running their own security as the 2014 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop withdrawal deadline nears – which is important because if they can't, the aid money's going to dry up. But the aid won't last forever – the government needs other sources of revenue too. As well, the young people are "effing poor" and therefore vulnerable to the attractions of insurgency. It's critical, in his view, that "things get moving" and basic infrastructure (the architecture of recovery, as he puts it) is built.

Not content to narrate history, he wants to nudge it along. Until recently Richard's been busy in uniform, chasing – and killing – insurgents in Afghanistan and before that, Iraq. But he was also instrumental in getting oil out of Kurdistan when no one thought that was possible, which helped turn that region's prospects around.

No one much fancies mining Afghanistan's mineral riches right now, but Richard and his rough-neck band of miners, ex-soldiers and adventure capitalists are up for having a go. They're going to bring jobs to this country: people can't live on AK-47s alone, Richard observes. He's also keen – God knows why – to grant us access to one of his operations next day. We're saved.

I'm up at five the next morning, before Richard can change his mind. Today, I'm flying solo. Walking briskly with Dan to a waiting armoured car, I get my 15-second situational awareness briefing: "Always do what other people do," he tells me. "Don't walk anywhere unless you see someone walking there first. Mines are everywhere in those hills. If there's a fire-fight, watch Richard. If he gets down, get down. If he runs, run."

How reassuring.

Later I arrive at a mining camp in the Hindu Kush mountains, ready to play my latest role of thoughtful documentary producer. Overnight, Andrew's done his Google homework and caught me on a *Spartacus* episode. He greets me, grinning: "I saw your bottom last night." Yeech.

Postscript November 25, 2012, to the present: Auckland and Dunedin

Everyone loves the footage. It blows our original series premise out of the water; Richard and crew are now a whole series. The edit and written pitch are done by February 2013 and the NHNZ sales teams in London and the US are poised to go.

We send a memorandum of understanding to Richard's company, a formality that asks permission to pitch the series to broadcasters. Or so we think. No reply. We wait. Two weeks pass. Three. We prompt again. Nothing. I've sunk more than 600 hours into the project and we've hit yet another wall. No one will talk to us, so we have no idea what the problem is.

It's yet another hurdle, and it won't be the last. I commence a campaign of Skype- and cyber-stalking, working on Devin, Richard's deputy. Three weeks on, it suddenly pays off and we get an answer. The wheels of tortuous negotiation begin to grind again. The final hurdle nears: actually selling the series to a network. Will they spurn us, as you would the rabid dogs that roam in packs through Kabul after nightfall?

Dan won't grow old waiting. He's already moved on: he's now vice-president of operations for Guardian Medevac in the Middle East, guiding their expansion into Rwanda and Haiti. Neil, our man at National History, has left and gone freelance. I'm the last man standing, a lonely King Lear figure, madder by the minute.

Come September, though, I might just be running around Badakhshan province behind my cameraman, hot coffee in one hand, cable in another, keeping an eye out for stray rockets. Or not, as the case might be. They might turn out to be roads to nowhere but, if nothing else, the last year has opened up doors in development land hitherto closed to me.

If all else fails, I tell myself, I have enough Emirates miles from my business-class trip to fly to the moon and back.

Maybe I'll ask Dan to come along for the ride. +