

Atlas, Broken

By Jeremy Tyrrell

Smashwords Edition

Copyright 2014 Jeremy Tyrrell

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Table of Contents

[Chapter One: Henry](#)

[Chapter Two: Work](#)

[Chapter Three: Home](#)

[Chapter Four: Garage](#)

[Chapter Five: Work Again](#)

[Chapter Six: Home Again](#)

[Chapter Seven: Garage Again](#)

[Chapter Eight: Junk](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Jeremy Tyrrell](#)

Henry

“Damn you, Henry,” Loretta whispered as her slumber was rudely disturbed, “Damn you!”

It is said that the most annoying noise in the world is an alarm clock. This is true, and was true for Loretta, and it was especially true for Henry.

As his eyes shot open and blinked wearily, searching for the snooze button, he discovered that there was a noise more annoying than the buzzing of the infernal device, and that noise was the buzzing of his wife's voice.

“Henry!” she hissed, rolling over, “Henry! Turn that bloody alarm off and get up!”

“I'm trying to find the stupid button,” he moaned.

The new gadget, designed specifically to irritate, was a gift given to him by his co-workers at the behest of his boss. The button to turn off the alarm was one of several that would glow briefly only to change quickly, keeping him guessing where it would glow next. He had to press it three times to get it right.

“If you'd just get up when you're supposed to you wouldn't have to have that stupid thing.”

He yawned, “I'm so tired. So damn tired.”

“You sit around on your arse all day. How can you possibly be tired?” she muttered through a pillow, “Just get to work and let me sleep.”

With a crackling back he straightened himself up. He was dog tired. Given the chance he could easily have slept another hour or ten, and maybe then he would have a chance of feeling refreshed. There was no point trying to get any more sleep. He was awake, and he had to get to work, and that was all there was to it.

His neck popped a little as he rolled his head. The scratching sound of his palms on his stubble filled the room as he rubbed his face. The hairs on his face were at that itchy, scratchy, annoying length; too long to be ignored, not long enough to be soft and smooth.

He could have shaved. He really should have shaved. In a

perfect world he would be clean shaven, would wear crisp pants and have a nice shirt with a tidy collar. In a perfect world he would bound out of bed, kiss his wife goodbye, check in on the kids and march out the door with a good breakfast in his stomach.

He would drive in his shiny car down the clear streets, waving to his neighbours and find a good park at work with twenty minutes to spare before he had to start.

But Henry didn't live in a perfect world.

Instead his world showed him, in the dim, grey light of the bathroom, the image of a run-down face, puffy around the eyes, and puffer around his stomach. He looked down at his spare tyre, squished it a little in his hand and tried to flatten it down. It stubbornly bounced back.

He opened his mouth and smelled his breath. His tongue had a thin, white coating on it. His eyes, bloodshot, were underlined by dark patches. His muscles were flaccid. He pushed the front of his pyjama pants forward to check out the contents. Also flaccid.

Screw shaving.

He stumbled into the kitchen, muttering and cursing to himself, making a bee-line for the coffee machine. By an absent minded command his hand opened the pod jar and gripped empty air. Groaning, he opened his eyes to confirm what his hand suspected. No coffee pods.

“Great,” he grumbled, checking the container again, and then behind it, in case one had fallen down the back.

He could make an instant. He could boil the kettle and get a cup and get a spoon and get the milk and muster up enough concentration to assemble it all.

He stifled a heavy yawn. It was unsatisfying, stifling a yawn, especially one so large. The tremulous energy put behind it demanded an ear piercing bellow as the air was exhaled, a mighty roar that would let everyone know that he was awake and alive. His ancestors would have welcomed such a thunderous yowl. His family, though, would not.

So, instead of an earth-shattering cry, it came out as a protracted peep, a whistling sigh, ending in a quiet breath.

“No coffee. Bugger. I'll pick one up at Di Mattina's,” he said to himself, trudging back to the bedroom to get dressed.

He solidly stubbed his toe on way through to the bedroom. The timbers in the house laughed at his antics, then at his bent digit, then at his twisted face. Pain shot up through his leg and did its best to work its way out. The yelp within him was suppressed. He bit his lip, closed his eyes and let the natural response play out in his mind.

In that expansive world he was hollering and yelping, clutching his foot and dancing about, making a scene to express the pain and embarrassment he was suffering.

On the outside, in the real world with its many concerns and social taboos, he merely let out an exasperated breath.

Loretta rolled over, mumbling, “Clumsy oaf. Be more careful! And pick up some milk and bread on the way home.”

The pain continued, albeit at a lesser intensity, so he stopped prancing about inside his head and took a second to look at the damage. His toe was pointing out at an awkward angle from its peers. With an effort he tried to move it back into place, but that only made things worse. With a subdued pop it flipped back in the opposite direction and pointed down.

After a bit more grunting and pushing, he worked the toe to be roughly aligned with the others. Somewhat satisfied, he put his foot down, but the toe stubbornly flopped down again.

Frowning, rubbing his foot and poking about in the closet, he got dressed in yesterday's suit. It was a little crinkled. It needed ironing. There was a stain on the leg from where he spilled yesterday's coffee, but apart from that it was fresh enough.

Back in the kitchen, he fished out the crusts of bread from the packet and inspected them for mould.

Not that he expected to find any. It was just that he had found some in the past. And a few times since then. But there was nothing to suspect that this bread loaf might have mould on it.

It was a habit, was all it was, that he had picked up along the rickety, unsealed road that had been his life. The same as sniffing the milk, or checking his shoes for spiders, or making sure the fly-screen door was closed before going to bed.

After making his toast and taking a couple of minutes to scoff a slice over the sink, he grabbed his satchel and slung it over his head. The strap nestled neatly into the groove that had been worn into his shoulder over the years.

He put on his hat, even though it was going to be a hot summer day, double checked his pockets for his keys and wallet, patted his shirt to confirm his phone was in there, and hustled out the door.

“Bye, Love,” he called out.

“Bye, Hon,” came a muffled reply.

Traffic, that great Titan, was abominable. It always was. He had experimented leaving earlier to avoid the rush, taking alternate routes, adjusting his driving style to be more aggressive or more passive or more assertive. Nothing seemed to work.

Traffic was Traffic, and it ruled the great, bitumen scarred savannah that lay between his home and the office. Traffic, the Great Invariant, the Almighty Constant, could not be conquered by the pathetic attempts of a man. Come what may, he would arrive at work at precisely the time Traffic deemed was suitable, and not a moment earlier.

Every day he tortured himself over it: Surely, he reasoned, by leaving five minutes earlier, it should be possible to arrive five minutes earlier. It didn't add up. He had done statistics in High School, and he had done it again in University. He had learnt that such a matter as the time taken to get to work will distribute itself about a mean, and that mean can be influenced by starting values.

If, for example, he had left at one in the morning, it only made sense that he should get to work only a brief period after. The way the Universe was configured clearly demonstrated that these assumptions were absolute tosh, for as he moved his starting time toward the morning rush, a stranger, stronger force, stronger even than mathematics, took over and well behaving statistics went out the window.

Whether it was raining, or sunny, or if there were school holidays on or not, or whether there was a crash on the South Eastern Arterial, or if the Lygon Street festival was on, no matter what, he would arrive at work, without fail, at twenty five past eight.

It was a combination of traffic lights, of course, and freak incidents, and trucks performing complicated U-turns, and taxis stopping to pick up people on the side of the road, and nannas heading off early to get to the bank, and *morons on their bloody mobile phones*.

Like the one in front. He could see him clearly in the mirror, head down, reading some text or fiddling with Facebook. He blasted the horn and swore out the window. The blue Toyota in front lurched back to life as the driver within quickly tossed the phone to one side.

It sped through the lights, leaving Henry stuck at the red to wait out another cycle. He was grinding his teeth; another bad habit that Henry had picked up.

A tram, one that he had successfully overtaken only a few lights before, prattled up and stopped next to him, promising to make it harder for him to overtake again. It opened its doors to pick up more passengers.

The lights turned green.

“Come on, come on,” Henry seethed through his teeth, “Hurry up and get on the damn thing!”

He watched with no little anger as a woman with wet hair and a hassled look on her face raced in from the footpath with her hands waving. The doors, which had just begun to close, were thrown open again.

“*Oh, come on!*” yelled Henry, exasperated, slapping the steering wheel with his hand, “Ah! Ah, hell! Geez! Hell's bells!”

He wiggled his jaw, squeezing it with his hand to stop the sudden, jarring pain. He moaned a little, forgetting the annoying amber light that signalled Traffic's victory over his pathetic vehicle, and reached into his mouth to pull out two loose articles.

Opening his hand slowly and looking down through the blood and saliva, he spied two shining white lumps on his palm.

“Hell's bells,” he said again, rattling them a little.

A horn from behind him shocked him back. He hurriedly put the car in gear, swore, lifted the clutch, swore again and bunny hopped to motion. His teeth ended up somewhere in the passenger foot-well. He would have to fish them out later.

“Always something,” he complained to himself, “There's always bloody something.”

He stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth to stop the bleeding. Using the back of his hand to wipe his face, he concentrated on the rest of the journey to work. A minute or two to find a park. A few minutes to grab a coffee across the road. Another minute to get upstairs. And that meant that he would be late, again, and be grilled by Mister Miro, again.

He gritted his teeth, stopped doing that because it hurt, and gripped the steering wheel hard instead.

It wasn't like he meant to be late. And it wasn't like he was half an hour late. And it wasn't like he didn't make up the time during lunch, or by working late.

It was two damn minutes every time. What was two minutes, anyway? Spend a little longer at the water cooler, bang, there's your two minutes. Spend a little longer on the crapper, bang, there's your two minutes. Spend a little longer checking an email... Ah, what was the point?

It was going to be the same thing today, as it was yesterday, as it was the day before that. Only he would have to do it with a busted toe, an aching jaw and without a couple of teeth.

Work

The park was not great. Across the main road and a side-street away, it was better than having to park the next street over, close to the shopping strip. The walk from there was longer, and there was a higher concentration of nannas milling about, especially on pension day.

At the crossing, he stopped to wait for the lights with the rest of the hordes that had dragged their sorry corpses out of bed.

There, in front of him, loomed Atlas Holdings. Its grey and brown exterior, aged and cracked to the point of crumbling, did nothing to imply that inside was anything different. The windows needed to be cleaned. The sign wanted a fresh lick of paint.

The only thing that stopped it from being just another concrete slab in the forest of concrete slabs was the gigantic statue of Atlas. Muscular, strong, bearing the weight of the world on his back, he was the archetype of what a man could be.

He could carry the heaviest of loads. He could bear the unbearable. He stood until the end of time, reliable and invincible, stolidly facing his task. Atlas could not be shaken, not matter what the world could throw at him because, after all, he was holding it.

The lights went green, Henry pounced off the pavement, coffee in hand, to enter the dull doors and nod politely to Miss Fisher on reception.

He attempted a smile. She reciprocated.

“Hi, Henry.”

“Hi, Miss Fisher. How're you?”

“Fine thanks. How're you?”

“A little sore, actually.”

“That's good.”

She drove a knife into an envelope and pulled the innards out, roughly splashing them on the desk.

“Do you need something?” she asked.

“Ah. No,” he said, “Sorry.”

He hustled over to his cubicle, keen to slip in before anyone noticed. If he got his monitor on and his computer powered, he

would be just fine. The machine buzzed to life, flicking through to the login screen after a few seconds.

Henry's Boss, Mister Miro, had seen his entrance and was watching him from under his shaggy eyebrows. This was the menacing pose he struck when he needed to be authoritative. He stormed over.

“Late again, Henry?” he asked, appearing behind him.

He was shorter than Henry. He was dumpy, and fat, and sour-faced, and quite ugly. His suit was permanently attached to his frame. If there was a human underneath the layers of material, Henry could not imagine it. And if he ever tried, his mind turned away, shuddering.

Apparently he was married. Apparently some woman out there had seen through his abrasive personality and obvious mental deficiency, and found him enough of a catch to slip a ring onto his finger. His thoughts turned to what such an amazingly resilient woman would look like.

In many ways, Henry thought to himself, Mister Miro was quite inferior to him.

Why, if it came to a straight-line run, Henry would win hands down. If they had a game of chess, he would be sure to whip his Boss. If there was ever a chance of fisticuffs, oh! if ever there was a chance! But if ever there was, Henry would show him a thing or two.

But Mister Miro, Big M behind his back, was his Boss, appointed and approved by upper management. He was part of the furniture, part of the firm, and there would be no budging from his role as top-dog on the ground floor.

“Not really, sir.”

“Not really? Looks like *really* to me, Ludlow,” he retorted, holding up his shiny watch.

Henry protested, “It's only thirty two past. And my teeth...”

“Not by my watch. Mine says thirty five past.”

Henry looked at his phone. It agreed with Henry's assessment and, he imagined, pretty much every other electronic device in the office that had access to the internet.

“The phone says...” he began, but thought better of it.

Mister Miro was not one to be corrected. In fact, Henry might have the entire Chronological Institute of Switzerland backing his cause and still Mister Miro would shrug, point to his watch and shake his head.

"I'll add in five off my lunch," Henry resigned.

"Make it ten to make up for yesterday."

"But I already... Ah, whatever."

Mister Miro forced a smile, "That's whatever, *sir*, Henry. You can lose the attitude."

"Yes, *sir*."

"You don't look very presentable this morning, Ludlow. I hope you haven't any on-site visits today. Why, look at you. You haven't even shaved. And you've got blood on your chin."

"It's my teeth, *sir*. They fell out."

"All of them?"

"Only two."

He pulled his cheek back to show him. There were two gaping holes staring back.

"Tsk, tsk! Henry, that's no good. No good at all."

"Tell me about it. One minute I was..."

"No good for the company. We can't have you talking to clients with missing teeth. Where are they, anyway?"

"In my car."

"What are they doing there?"

"Well, if I'd stop to search for them, I would have been late."

"You *are* late, Henry! And unshaven. And missing teeth. This is not how an employee of Atlas conducts himself," Mister Miro barked, "It's undignified and I won't have it, you hear me?"

"Yes, *sir*."

"I don't want to see any more gaps in your mouth, Ludlow. At least those two are on the side. Try not to smile so hard and you should be fine," he instructed in a fatherly manner.

"Shouldn't be a problem, *sir*."

Mister Miro, having imparted his unworldly wisdom, nodded to himself, adjusted his tie and marched off to inspect the other cubicles. Henry ignored him and turned to face his rectangular

prison.

He sat down at his desk and plonked his coffee on top. It spilled a little, creating a ring around the base that, in an hour or so, would harden to a semi-permanent feature on his desk along with all the other semi-permanent rings that he had built up over the month.

The cleaners never wiped his desk down, he noticed. The only time the rings ever disappeared was when he decided that the terrain on his desk was too uneven to rest his hands on. Surely the cleaners had some kind of vendetta against him. That sounded a little paranoid, and it was, but it was the truth.

The used staples on the floor remained there from last year. He had, as an experiment, coloured one of them with a marker. Every so often he would look down and note that it was still there, waiting patiently for a vacuum cleaner to lift it from its short-pile home and deliver it to a better place.

A better place. A better time. Somewhere that wasn't here or now, Henry mused, somewhere else entirely. Wherever that better place was, it was wherever he wasn't. It was not anywhere at home, or on the way to work, or anywhere around or between.

Perhaps it was in another country. Perhaps all the better places had already been consumed, and all that was left were the grisly sinews, bones and scraps of everyday life. Perhaps there was no such thing as a better place. It was a mythical construct designed solely with the intention of keeping the false embers of hope glowing.

That was a depressing thought, that the best was already gone, that there was nowhere left to go but down.

He looked at the confines of his cubicle, at the aged, bent photographs pinned to the sides, at the scrappy, skin-speckled mousepad, at the piles of paper varying from white at the top through to yellow at the bottom. He sighed a long lungful of air. It was hard to imagine what down would be like.

The ember of hope inside him glowed a little. Maybe it would not be so bad. Maybe, given the right push, he could quit his infernal job and start afresh as a sandwich hand in the cafe over the road. Maybe he could take out a loan and start his own cafe.

He could learn how to make proper coffee, how to roast his

own beans and start a franchise and whip up batches of muffins to feed the hungry workers.

Or maybe he could stop dreaming and get on with his work.

He wiggled his mouse to get some life into the cursor and double clicked on his usual pattern of applications. His first stop was his emails. If there was just something about the merger, a little note indicating that the client was pliable, that might be something that could make his miserable morning more bearable.

He waited with a vacant stare, sipping his coffee while he watched the progress bar slowly fill from the left side to the right. It sat, tantalisingly close to completion, only one more block to go.

“Hey, Hank,” said Geoff, balding and sombre, poking his nose over the top of the cubicle, “Late again, huh?”

“Evidently. Thing is, doesn't matter what I do, somehow I'm always getting in at the same time, and you know what? I reckon Big M is waiting for me every morning. Why else would he always be in this vicinity, hmm?” mumbled Henry, taking another sip and wincing as the heat of the coffee aggravated the fresh nerve endings in his mouth, “The ground floor is too big for that to be a coincidence. I think he's got it in for me. I reckon if I got in five minutes early he wouldn't even notice.”

“Big M's like that, you know. Only picks out the negatives.”

“How come you're never in late?” Henry asked.

“I never go home,” he joked.

Henry looked up at him. Geoff's eyes were puffy and black. His jowls hung low, slack from years of remaining loose and pliant. If there ever was someone who could believably state that he never went home, joking or not, Geoff was the guy.

He was always just around, always somewhere in the building.

“You get your coffee from Di Mattina's?” Geoff asked, pointing to the logo on the cup, “Terrible stuff. You should go to Borsello.”

“Too far to walk. And I cut it pretty fine as it is.”

“Never too far to walk for good coffee. Only thing that keeps me sane. Ha.”

“Is that the answer, then? Coffee?”

“It's a start.”

“Hey, do you reckon, and hear me out on this, but do you reckon if I bought a cafe, I'd be any good?”

“Can you make a decent cup?”

“I don't know. But how hard could it be to learn? You've got uni bums in Di Mattina's who haven't got the wherewithal to tie their laces, and they can make a brew,” Henry said, “How hard can it be?”

“True, but their coffee is still crap – whoops, here comes Big M,” Geoff said, then ducked back down.

Mister Miro's shoes marched with their regular time, the heel-toe evident even through the layer of worn carpet.

“Settled in, Henry? Taken your time, then? Had a good chat, Henry?”

“Sir?”

“Leave Geoff to do his work, Henry, and concentrate on yours.”

“But he was speaking to me.”

“And you were speaking to him!”

Henry bit his tongue. Again, no matter what argument he could deliver, Mister Miro would win out. Logic can't compare with a pigheaded lump of cement. He decided to change the topic.

“The merger's looking the same as it was yesterday night. Haven't had any emails or calls come through just yet. Just some stuff about the up-coming Henshaw account.”

Mister Miro sniffed, “I hadn't asked, Ludlow.”

“I thought that'd be why you came over, sir.”

“I came over to tell you to stop your yapping and get on with doing what you're employed to do! But, since you brought it up, what's the latest?”

“Um. Like I just said. There's no change from yesterday.”

“No change?” Mister Miro asked, eyebrows raised, “That's not the kind of news I was hoping for.”

“Well, um, sorry about that,” he replied, getting a little warm around his collar, “It's just that unless there's an email or a phone call or...”

“That sounds like loser talk to me, Ludlow. That sounds like

you're giving up. You know why? Because a real winner wouldn't be content with letting things just sit. A real winner wouldn't wait for the merger to happen or not happen," Mister Miro intoned, working up to a fever, "A winner does whatever needs to be done! Not like a loser. You know what a loser does? A loser lies back lazily and takes what comes. And I don't have losers in this office."

"Yes, Mister Miro."

"I only have winners! That's how we thrive! That's how we remain ahead of the pack! Atlas is a winner! Look at him, Henry, on your way in and on your way out. He's out there, holding up the world. Rain, hail, or shine! He's dependable. He has to be!" Mister Miro said dramatically, holding his arms up and shaking his flabby cheeks, "He's not a loser."

"Yes, Mister Miro."

"You don't want to be a loser, do you?"

"No, Mister Miro."

"Good! Good!" he said, his words dripping with sarcasm, "That's a good boy. That's what I like to hear. So what are you going to do about it?"

"There's not a lot I *can* do, Mister Miro. We've already made our offer, and if we make a second counter-offer before Gibson makes their first, we may appear desperate."

Mister Miro's face fell, "We're not desperate, Henry."

"I know, um, I mean, that's right. That's what I'm saying. That's why we need to hold off and let them respond to our offer -"

Mister Miro repeated, louder, so that everyone could hear it, "We're not *desperate*, Henry!"

"Yes, sir, that's why..."

"And the last thing you want to let our clients think is that we're incapable of keeping our cool. And that goes for our competition, too. Why, if we show any sign of weakness, they'll pounce on us like a cat on a mouse. They'll tear us to shreds! They'll scatter our parts to the wind."

Henry's face turned red, "Which is why..."

Mister Miro smiled his sickly, wide smile, "Which is why Gibson's counter-offer will need to be made *before* we make a

counter-offer. You can't rush these things, Ludlow. You see? Do you understand?"

Henry's mouth twitched. He wanted to punch Mister Miro. He wanted to plant his fist into his jaw. He wanted to pick him up by his shoulders and belt, hold his round frame over his head and throw him over a cubicle or three. He wanted to sock him in his stomach so hard that he barfed all over his crisp pants and shiny shoes, and lay on the ground gasping for air like a goldfish.

But that would be illegal. It would be considered assault.

He would be arrested. And then Henry would be out of a job, in jail even, or fined. And none of those outcomes were really what he wanted. He wondered for half a second if it would be worth it.

"But, sir..."

"We're not desperate, Ludlow, so just you think twice about what you're doing before you go putting ideas into our client's and our competitor's minds."

There was no point arguing. In a roundabout way, Henry had made his point. In a roundabout, unsatisfying, frustratingly painful way.

"I'll hold off on the counter-offer," he hissed through his lips, "*Just like you said.*"

"Good, Ludlow, good. And you can lose the attitude."

Mister Miro eye-balled him for a few seconds before turning on his heels, content that he had performed his duty as Supervisor, Mentor and Overlord.

Home

Coming home was different to going to work. You couldn't get fired for coming home two minutes past the expected hour, for starters, so the pressure was not there. Still, Traffic, the Great Invariant, ensured that the trip back was just as mundane, tedious and predictably unpredictable as the trip to work.

Henry's car pattered through the city streets, waited in line at lights to reach the inner suburbs, wiggled between lanes in a vain bid to get past a bus or tram or slow moving truck and crawled up the main roads to finally reach his quiet suburb.

On hot days such as this one, Henry was always concerned that the added pressure on the car would cause the engine to give out, that the radiator would blow its top or that the oil would come gushing out across the road at the most inconvenient location. He had roadside assist, but there was still the fear of being stuck on the side of a stinking hot road, waiting for hours for the familiar orange lights to show themselves.

It had been making a rumbling, rattling noise from somewhere deep within, and the other day he found a few tell-tale spots of black oil that had bled from the lower bowels of the engine.

Loretta had demanded he get it serviced, and he would have done it, if he had half a day and a wad of cash to spare. The coming merger was important.

His car limped past the rows of houses, each doing its best to look like the next. From suburb to suburb it played out like a silent motion picture of style, a gradual change from weatherboard to brick, from iron roofing to faded tiles, from green grass to yellow, as he transitioned from civilisation to the Land of the Vertical Blinds.

In Gladstone Park the lawns were patchy. Hedges were uneven. Letterboxes, the sentinel of the suburban abode, were rusted and broken. It was not because the owners were lazy or poor, or that they shunned displays of opulence.

It was simply the way the suburb was and no amount of effort could change it. Anything new would fade and crumble as the Sun fired its destructive ultra-violet rays. Garden ornaments stood no

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

