A Fraction of the Whole

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Extract

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by

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ONE

You never hear about a sportsman losing his sense of smell in a tragic accident, and for good reason; in order for the universe to teach excruciating lessons that we are unable to apply in later life, the sportsman must lose his legs, the philosopher his mind, the painter his eyes, the musician his ears, the chef his tongue. My lesson? I have lost my freedom, and found myself in this strange prison, where the trickiest adjustment, other than getting used to not having anything in my pockets and being treated like a dog that pissed in a sacred temple, is the boredom. I can handle the enthusiastic brutality of the guards, the wasted erections, even the suffocating heat. (Apparently airconditioning offends society's notion of punishment – as if just by being a little cool we are getting away with murder.) But what can I do here to kill time? Fall in love? There's a female guard whose stare of indifference is alluring, but I've never been good at chasing women – I always take no for answer. Sleep all day? When my eyes are closed I see the menacing face that's haunted me my whole life. Meditate? After everything that's happened, I know the mind isn't worth the membrane it's printed on. There are no distractions here – not enough, anyway – to avoid

catastrophic introspection. Neither can I beat back the memories with a stick.

All that remains is to go insane; easy in a theatre where the apocalypse is performed every other week. Last night was a particularly stellar show: I had almost fallen asleep when the building started shaking and a hundred angry voices shouted as one. I stiffened. A riot, yet another ill-conceived revolution. It hadn't been going two minutes when my door was kicked open and a tall figure entered, wearing a smile that seemed merely ornamental.

'Your mattress. I need,' he said.

'What for?' I asked.

'We set fire to all mattress,' he boasted, thumbs up, as if this gesture were the jewel in the crown of human achievement.

'So what am I supposed to sleep on? The floor?'

He shrugged and started speaking in a language I didn't understand. There were odd-shaped bulges in his neck; clearly something terrible was taking place underneath his skin. The people here are all in a bad way and their clinging misfortunes have physically misshaped them. Mine have too; my face looks like a withered grape, my body the vine.

I waved the prisoner away and continued listening to the routine chaos of the mob. That's when I had the idea that I *could* pass the time by writing my story. Of course, I'd have to scribble it secretly, crouched behind the door, and only at night, and then hide it in the damp space between the toilet and the wall and hope my jailers aren't the type to get down on their hands and knees. I'd settled on this plan when the riot finally took the lights out. I sat on my bed and became mesmerised by the glow from burning mattresses illuminating the corridor, only to be interrupted by two grim, unshaven inmates who strode into my cell and stared at me as if I were a mountain view.

'Are you the one who won't give up his mattress?' the taller of the two growled, looking like he'd woken up with the same hangover three years running.

I said that I was.

'Step aside.'

'It's just that I was about to have a lie-down,' I protested. Both prisoners let out deep, unsettling laughs that sounded like the tearing of denim. The taller one pushed me aside and yanked the mattress from my bed while the other stood as if frozen and waiting to thaw. There are certain things I'll risk my neck for, but a lumpy mattress isn't one of them. Holding it between them, the prisoners paused at the door.

'Coming?' the shorter prisoner asked me.

'What for?'

'It's your mattress,' he said plainly. 'It is your right to be one who sets on fire.'

I groaned. Man and his codes! Even in a lawless inferno, man has to give himself some honour, he's so desperate to separate himself from the beasts.

'I'll pass.'

'As you like,' he said, a little disappointed. He muttered something in a foreign tongue to his cohort, who laughed as they left.

It's always something here – if there isn't a riot, then someone's usually trying to escape. The wasted effort helps me see the positives of imprisonment. Unlike those pulling their hair out in good society, here we don't have to feel ashamed of our day-to-day unhappiness. Here we have someone visible to blame – someone wearing shiny boots. That's why, on consideration, freedom leaves me cold. Because out there in the real world, freedom means you have to admit authorship, even when your story turns out to be a stinker.

Where to begin my story? Negotiating with memories isn't easy: how to choose between those panting to be told, those still ripening, those already shrivelling, and those destined to be mangled by language and come out pulverised? One thing's for sure: not writing about my father would take a mental effort that's beyond me. All my non-Dad thoughts feel like transparent strategies to avoid thinking about him. And why should I avoid it anyway? My father punished me for existing, and now it's my turn to punish him for existing. It's only fair.

But the real difficulty is, I feel dwarfed by our lives. They loom disproportionately large. We painted on a broader canvas than we deserved, across three continents, from obscurity to celebrity, from cities to jungles, from rags to designer rags, betrayed by our lovers and our bodies, and humiliated on a national then cosmic scale, with hardly a cuddle to keep us going. We were lazy people on an adventure, flirting with life but too shy to go all the way. So how to begin to recount our hideous odyssey? Keep it simple, Jasper. Remember, people are satisfied – no, thrilled – by the simplification of complex events. And besides, mine's a damn good story *and* it's true. I don't know why, but that seems to be important to people. Personally, if someone said to me, 'I've got this great story to tell you, and every word is an absolute lie!' I'd be on the edge of my seat.

I guess I should just admit it: this will be as much about my father as it is about me. I hate how no one can tell the story of his life without making a star of his enemy, but that's just the way it is. The fact is, the whole of Australia despises my father perhaps more than any other man, just as they adore his brother, my uncle, perhaps more than any other man. I might as well set the story straight about both of them, though I don't intend to undermine your love for my uncle or reverse your hatred for my father, especially if it's an expansive hatred. I don't want to spoil things if you use your hate to quicken your awareness of who you love.

I should also say this just to get it out of the way:
My father's body will never be found.

Most of my life I never worked out whether to pity, ignore, adore, judge or murder my father. His mystifying behaviour left me wavering right up until the end. He had conflicting ideas about anything and everything, especially my schooling: eight months into kindergarten he decided he didn't want me there any more because the education system was 'stultifying, soul-destroying, archaic and mundane'. I don't know how anyone could call finger painting archaic and mundane. Messy, yes. Soul-destroying, no. He took me out of school with the intention of educating me himself, and instead of letting me finger-paint he read me the letters Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo right before he cut off his ear, and also passages from the book *Human, All Too Human* so that together we could 'rescue Nietzsche from the Nazis'. Then Dad got distracted with the time-chewing business of staring into space, and I sat around the house twiddling my thumbs, wishing there was paint on them. After six weeks he plopped me back in kindergarten, and just as it started looking like I might have a normal life after all, suddenly, in the second week of first grade, he walked right into the classroom and yanked me out once again, because he'd been overcome with the fear that he was leaving my impressionable brain 'in the folds of Satan's underpants'.

This time he meant it, and from our wobbly kitchen table, while flicking cigarette ash into a pile of unwashed dishes, he taught me literature, philosophy, geography, history, and some nameless subject that involved going through the daily newspapers, barking at me about how the media do something he called 'whipping up moral panics', and demanding that I tell him why people allowed themselves to be whipped into panicking, morally. Other times he gave classes from his

bedroom, among hundreds of secondhand books, pictures of grave-looking dead poets, empty long necks, newspaper clippings, old maps, black stiff banana peels, boxes of unsmoked cigars, and ashtrays full of smoked ones.

This was a typical lesson:

'Okay, Jasper. Here it is: The world's not falling apart imperceptibly any more, these days it makes a loud shredding noise! In every city of the world, the smell of hamburgers marches brazenly down the street looking for old friends! In traditional fairy tales, the wicked witch was ugly; in modern ones, she has high cheekbones and silicone implants! People are not mysterious because they never shut up! Belief illuminates the way a blindfold does! Are you listening, Jasper? Sometimes you'll be walking in the city late at night, and a woman walking in front of you will spin her head around and then cross the street simply because some members of your gender rape women and molest children!'

Each class was equally bewildering, covering a diverse range of topics. He tried to encourage me to engage him in Socratic dialogues, but he wound up doing both parts himself. When there was a blackout during an electrical storm, Dad would light a candle and hold it under his chin to show me how the human face becomes a mask of evil with the right kind of lighting. He taught me that if I had to meet someone for an appointment, I must refuse to follow the 'stupid human habit' of arbitrarily choosing a time based on fifteen-minute intervals. 'Never meet people at 7:45 or 6:30, Jasper, but pick times like 7:12 and 8:03!' If the phone rang, he'd pick it up and not say anything – then, when the other person said hello, he would put on a wobbly, high-pitched voice and say, 'Dad not home.' Even as a child I knew that a grown man impersonating his six-year-old son to hide from the world was grotesque, but many years later I found myself doing the same thing, only I'd pretend to be him. 'My son isn't home. What is this regarding?'

I'd boom. Dad would nod in approval. More than anything, he approved of hiding.

These lessons continued into the outside world too, where Dad tried to teach me the art of bartering, even though we weren't living in that type of society. I remember him taking me by the hand to buy the newspaper, screaming at the baffled vendor, 'No wars! No market crashes! No killers on the loose! What are you charging so much for? Nothing's happened!'

I also remember him sitting me on a plastic yellow chair and cutting my hair; to him, it was one of those things in life that was so unlike brain surgery he refused to believe that if a man had a pair of hands and a pair of scissors he couldn't cut hair. 'I'm not wasting money on a barber, Jasper. What's to know? Obviously, you stop at the scalp.' My father the philosopher – he couldn't even give a simple haircut without reflecting on the meaning of it. 'Hair, the symbol of virility and vitality, although some very flaccid people have long hair and many vibrant baldies walk the earth. Why do we cut it anyway? What have we got against it?' he'd say, and let fly at the hair with wild, spontaneous swipes. Dad cut his own hair too, often without use of a mirror. 'It doesn't have to win any prizes,' he'd say, 'it just has to be shorter.' We were father and son with such demented, uneven hair – embodying one of Dad's favourite ideas that I only truly understood much later: there's freedom in looking crazy.

At nightfall, the day's lessons were capped with a bedtime story of his own invention. Yuck! They were always dark and creepy tales, and each had a protagonist that was clearly a surrogate me. Here's a typical one: *Once upon a time there was a little boy named Kasper. Kasper's friends all had the same ideas about a fat kid who lived down the street. They hated him. Kasper wanted to remain friends with the group, so he started hating the fat kid too. Then one morning Kasper woke up to find his brain had begun to putrefy until eventually it ran*

out his bottom in painful anal secretions. Poor Kasper! He really had a tough time of it. In that series of bedtime stories, he was shot, stabbed, bludgeoned, dipped in boiling seas, dragged over fields of shattered glass, had his fingernails ripped out, his organs devoured by cannibals; he vanished, exploded, imploded, and often succumbed to violent spasms and hearing loss. The moral was always the same: if you follow public opinion without thinking for yourself, you will die a sudden and horrific death. For ages I was terrified of agreeing with anyone about anything, even the time.

Kasper never triumphed in any significant way. Sure, he won little battles now and then and was rewarded (two gold coins, a kiss, the approval of his father), but never, not once, did he win the war. Now I realise it was because Dad's philosophy had won *him* few personal victories in life: not love, not peace, not success, not happiness. Dad's mind couldn't imagine a lasting peace or a meaningful victory; it wasn't in his experience. That's why Kasper was doomed from the outset. He didn't stand a chance, poor bastard.

One of the most memorable classes began when Dad entered my bedroom with an olive-green shoebox under his arm, and said 'Today's lesson is about you.'

He took me to the park opposite our apartment building, one of those sad, neglected city parks that looked as if it had been the location of a war between children and junkies and the children got their arses kicked. Dead grass, broken slides, a couple of rubber swings drifting in the wind on tangled, rusty chains.

'Look, Jasper,' Dad said as we settled on a bench. 'It's about time you found out how your grandparents fucked up, so you can work out what you did with the failures of your antecedents: did you run with them or ricochet against their errors, instead making your own

huge gaffes in an opposing orbit? We all crawl feebly away from our grandparents' graves with their sad act of dying ringing in our ears, and in our mouths we have the aftertaste of their grossest violation against themselves: the shame of their unlived lives. It's only the steady accumulation of regrets and failures and *our* shame or *our* unlived lives that opens the door to understanding them. If by some quirk of fate we led charmed lives, bounding energetically from one masterful success to another, we'd *never* understand them! Never!'

He opened the shoebox. 'I want you to look at something,' Dad said, scooping out a pile of loose photographs. 'This is your grandfather,' he continued, holding up a black-and-white picture of a young man with a beard leaning against a streetlight. The man wasn't smiling; it looked like he was leaning on that streetlight for fear of falling.

Dad switched to a photograph of a young woman with a plain, oval face and a weak smile. 'This is your grandmother,' he said, before he flipped through the photographs as if he were being timed. What glimpses of the monochromatic past I caught were puzzling. Their expressions were unchanging; my grandfather wore a permanently angst-ridden grimace, while my grandmother's smile looked more depressing than the saddest frown.

Dad pulled out another photograph. 'This is father number two. My real father. People always think biological is more "real" than a man who actually raised you, but you're not raised by a potent drop of semen, are you?'

He held the photograph under my eyes. I don't know if faces can be the polar opposite of each other, but in contrast to the solemn face of the first grandfather, this one grinned as if he'd been photographed on the happiest day of not just his life but all life everywhere. He wore overalls splattered with white paint, had wild blond hair, and was streaming sweat.

'Actually, the truth is I don't look at these photos much, because all I see when I look at photographs of dead people is that they're dead,' Dad said. 'Doesn't matter if it's Napoleon or my own mother, they are simply the Dead.'

That day I learned that my grandmother had been born in Poland right at the unlucky time Hitler annihilated his delusions of grandeur by making them come true – he emerged as a powerful leader with a knack for marketing. As the Germans advanced, my grandmother's parents fled Warsaw, dragged her across Eastern Europe, and, after a few harrowing months, arrived in China. That's where my grandmother grew up – in the Shanghai Ghetto during the war. She was raised speaking Polish, Yiddish, and Mandarin, suffering the soggy diseases of monsoon seasons, severe rationing, and American air raids, but surviving.

After the US troops entered Shanghai with the bad news of the Holocaust, and many in the Jewish community left China for all corners of the globe, my great-grandparents decided to stay, having established themselves as owners of a successful multilingual cabaret and kosher butcher shop. This perfectly suited my young grandmother, who was already in love with my grandfather, an actor in their theatre. Then, in 1956, when she was just seventeen, my grandmother got pregnant, forcing her and my grandfather's families to rush through the wedding preparations as you had to do in the old world when you didn't want people to do the maths. The week following her wedding, the family decided to return to Poland, to raise the coming child, the cluster of cells that would become my father, in their homeland.

They weren't welcomed back with open arms, to say the least. Who knows whether it was guilt or fear of retribution or simply the

unwelcome surprise of a family ringing the doorbell and saying, 'You're in my house,' but they had been home less than ten minutes when, in front of my grandmother, her parents were beaten to death with an iron pipe. My grandmother ran but her husband remained, and he was shot for praying in Hebrew over their bodies, though he had yet to say 'Amen,' so the message wasn't transmitted. ('Amen' is like the Send button on an email.)

Suddenly a widow and an orphan, she fled Poland for the second time in her young life, this time on a boat bound for Australia, and after two months of staring at the daunting circumference of the horizon, she went into labour just as someone shouted, 'There it is!' Everyone ran to the side of the boat and leaned over the rail. Steep cliffs crowned with clusters of green trees lined the coast. Australia! The younger passengers let out cries of joy. The older passengers knew that the key to happiness lay in keeping your expectations low. They booed.

'Are you with me so far?' Dad asked, interrupting himself. 'These are the building blocks of your identity. Polish. Jewish. Persecuted. Refugee. These are just some of the vegetables with which we make a Jasper broth. You got it?'

I nodded. I got it. Dad continued.

Though she could still hardly speak a word of English, my grandmother hooked up with my grandfather number two after only six months. It's debatable whether this should be a source of pride or a source of shame, but he was a man who could trace his family back to the last boatload of English-born convicts dumped on Australian soil. While it's true that some criminals were sent down for petty crimes such

as stealing a loaf of bread, my father's ancestor had not been one of them – or that is, he might have been, but he also raped three women, and if after raping those women he swiped a loaf of bread on his way home, it is not known.

Their courtship was fast. Apparently unperturbed by acquiring a child not of his own making, within a month, armed with a Polish dictionary and a book on English grammar, he asked my grandmother to marry him. 'I'm just a battler, which means it'll be us against the world, and the world will probably win hands down every time, but we'll never give up fighting, no matter what, how does that sound?' She didn't answer. 'Come on. Just say, "I do,"' he pleaded. 'It comes from the verb "to do". That's all you need for now. Then we'll move you on to "I did."'

My grandmother considered her situation. She didn't have anybody to help look after her baby if she went out to work, and she didn't want her child to grow up fatherless and poor. She thought, 'Do I have the necessary ruthlessness to marry a man I don't really love for my son's welfare? Yes, I do.' Then, looking at his hapless face, she thought, 'I could do worse,' one of the most ostensibly benign though chilling phrases in any language.

He was unemployed when they married, and when she moved into his apartment, my grandmother was dismayed to discover it was filled with a terrifying potpourri of macho toys: rifles, replica pistols, model war planes, weights and dumbbells. When immersed in bodybuilding, kung fu training, or cleaning his gun, he whistled amiably. In the quiet moments when the frustration of unemployment settled in and he was absorbed with anger and depression, he whistled darkly.

Then he found a job with the New South Wales Prison Services near a small town being settled four hours away. He wasn't going to work in the jail – he was going to help build it.

Because a prison was soon to loom on the town's outskirts, an unkind publication in Sydney dubbed the settlement (in which my father was to grow up) the least desirable place to live in New South Wales.

The road entered town on a descent, and as my grandparents drove in, they saw the foundations of the penitentiary on top of a hill. Set amid huge, mute trees, that half-built prison looked to my grandmother to be half demolished, and the thought struck her as an unpleasant omen. It strikes me as one too, considering that my grandfather moved to this town to build a prison and I am now writing from one. The past is truly an inoperable tumour that spreads to the present.

They moved into a boxy weatherboard house, and the following day, while my grandmother explored the town, inadvertently frightening the residents with her aura of the survivor, my grandfather began his new job. I'm not exactly sure what role he had, but apparently for the next several months he spoke incessantly of locked doors, cold halls, cell measurements, and grilled windows. As the building neared completion, he became obsessed with everything to do with prisons, even checking out books from the newly established local library on their construction and history. At the same time, my grandmother put as much energy into learning English, and this was the beginning of a new catastrophe. As her understanding of the English language grew, she began to understand her husband.

His jokes turned out to be stupid and racist. Moreover some of them weren't even jokes but long pointless stories that ended with my grandfather saying things like 'And then I said, "Oh yeah?"' She realised he bitched endlessly about his lot in life, and when he wasn't being nasty, he was merely banal; when not paranoid, he was boring. Soon his conversation made his handsome face grow ugly; his expression took on a cruel quality; his mouth, half open, became

an expression of his stupidity. From then on every day was worsened by the new language barrier that had grown up between them – the barrier of speaking the same language.

Dad put the photographs back in the box with a dark expression, as if he had wanted a trip down memory lane but when he got there he remembered it was his least favourite street.

'Okay, that's your grandparents. All you have to know about grandparents is that they were young once too. You have to know they didn't mean to be the embodiment of decay or even want especially to hold on to their ideas until their final day. You have to know they didn't want to run out of days. You have to know they are dead and that the dead have bad dreams. They dream of us.'

He stared at me for a while, waiting for me to say something. Now, of course, I know that everything he told me was merely an introduction. I didn't understand back then that after a good, cleansing monologue, Dad wanted nothing more than for me to prod him into another one. I just pointed to the swings and asked him to push me.

'You know what?' he said. 'Maybe I'll throw you back into the ring for another round.'

He was returning me to school. Maybe he knew it was there I would learn the second part to that story, that I would inevitably discover another, crucial ingredient to my own distinctive identity soup.

A month into my new school I was still trying to adjust to being among other children again, and I decided I'd never comprehend why Dad went from ordering me to despise these people to ordering me to blend in with them.

I had made only one friend, but I was trying to accumulate more, because to survive you needed no fewer than two, in case one was away sick. One day at lunchtime I was standing behind the canteen watching two boys fight over a black water pistol.

One of the boys said, 'You can be the cop. I wanna be Terry Dean.'

The other boy said, 'No, *you're* the cop. *I'm* Terry Dean.'

I wanted to play too. I said, 'Maybe I should be Terry Dean. It's my name anyway.' They looked at me in that snide, superior way eight-year-olds look at you. 'I'm Jasper Dean,' I added.

'Are you related?'

'I don't think so.'

'Then piss off.'

That hurt.

I said, 'Well, I'll be the cop then.'

That grabbed their attention. Everyone knows that in games of cops and robbers, the robber is always the default hero while the cops are fodder. You can never have too much fodder.

We played all lunchtime and at the sound of the bell I betrayed my ignorance by asking, 'Who's Terry Dean?' – a question that made my playmates sick.

'Shit! You don't even know who he is!'

'He's the baddest man in the whole world.'

'He was a bank robber.'

'And a killer!' the other one said, before they ran off without saying goodbye, in the same way as when you go to a nightclub with friends and they get lucky.

That afternoon I went home to find Dad hitting the edge of a cabinet with a banana so it made a hard knocking sound.

'I froze a banana,' he said listlessly. 'Take a bite . . . if you dare.'

'Am I related to the famous bank robber Terry Dean?' I asked.

The banana dropped like a chunk of cement. Dad sucked his lips into his mouth, and from somewhere inside, a small, hollow voice I strained to hear said, 'He was your uncle.'

'My what? My uncle? I have an uncle?' I asked, incredulous. 'And he's a famous bank robber?'

'Was. He's dead,' Dad said, before adding, 'he was my brother.'

That was the first time I heard of him. Terry Dean, cop killer, bank robber, hero to the nation, pride of the battler – he was my uncle, my father's brother, and he was to cast an oblong shadow over both our lives, a shadow that for a long time prevented either of us from getting a decent tan.

If you're Australian, you will at least have heard of Terry Dean. If you aren't, you won't have, because while Australia is an eventful place, what goes on there is about as topical in world newspapers as 'Bee Dies in New Guinea After Stinging Tree by Mistake.' It's not our fault. We're too far away. That's what a famous Australian historian once called the 'tyranny of distance.' What he meant was, Australia is like a lonely old woman dead in her apartment; if every living soul in the land suddenly had a massive coronary at the exact same time and if the Simpson Desert died of thirst and the rainforests drowned and the barrier reef bled to death, days might pass and only the smell drifting across the ocean to our Pacific neighbours would compel someone to call the police. Otherwise we'd have to wait until the Northern Hemisphere commented on the uncollected mail.

Dad wouldn't talk to me about his brother. Every time I asked him for details he'd sigh long and deep, as though this were another setback he didn't need, so I embarked on my own research.

First I asked my classmates, but I received answers that differed from each other so wildly, I just had to discount them all. Then I examined the measly collection of family photographs that I had seen only fleetingly before, the ones that lay in the green shoebox

stuffed into the hall closet. This time I noticed that three of the photographs had been butchered to remove someone's head. The operation could hardly be described as seamless. I could still see the neck and shoulders in two photos, and a third was just two pieces clumsily stuck together with uneven strips of brown packing tape. I concluded that my father had tried to erase any image of his brother so he might forget him. The futility of the attempt was obvious; when you put in that much effort to forget someone, the effort itself becomes a memory. Then you have to forget the forgetting, and that too is memorable. Fortunately, Dad couldn't erase the newspaper articles I found in the state library that described Terry's escapades, his killing spree, his manhunt, his capture, and his death. I made photocopies and pasted them to the walls of my bedroom, and at night I fantasised that I was my uncle, the fiercest criminal ever to hide a body in the soil and wait for it to grow.

In a bid to boost my popularity, I told everyone at school about my connection to Terry Dean, doing everything to broadcast it short of hiring a publicist. It was big news for a while, and one of the worst mistakes I've ever made. At first, in the faces of my peers, I inspired awe. But then kids of all ages came out of the woodwork wanting to fight me. Some wanted to make reputations for beating the nephew of Terry Dean. Others were eager to wipe the proud smile off my face; pride must have magnified my features unappealingly. I talked my way out of a number of scuffles, but one day before school my assailants tricked me by flouting the regulation time code for beatings: it always happens *after* school, never in the morning, before an eight-year-old has had his coffee. Anyway, there were four of them, four bruisers grim-faced and fist-ready. I didn't stand a chance. I was cornered. This was it: my first fight.

A crowd had gathered around to watch. They chanted in their best *Lord of the Flies* manner. I searched the faces for allies.

No luck. They all wanted to see me go down screaming. I didn't take it personally. It was just my turn, that's all. I tell you, it's indescribable the joy children get from watching a fight. It's a blinding Christmas orgasm for a child. And this is human nature undiluted by age and experience! This is mankind fresh out of the box! Whoever says it's life that makes monsters out of people should check out the raw nature of children, a lot of pups who haven't yet had their dose of failure, regret, disappointment, and betrayal but still behave like savage dogs. I have nothing against children, I just wouldn't trust one not to giggle if I accidentally stepped on a land mine.

My enemies closed in. The fight was seconds away from starting, and probably as many seconds away from finishing. I had nowhere to go. They came closer. I made a colossal decision: *I would not put up a fight. I would not take it like a man. I would not take it like a battler.* Look, I know people like reading about those outclassed in strength who make up for it in spirit, like my uncle Terry. Respected are those who go down fighting, right? But those noble creatures still get a hell of a clobbering, and I didn't want a clobbering of any kind. Also, I remembered something Dad had taught me in one of our kitchen-table classes. He said, 'Listen, Jasper. Pride is the first thing you need to do away with in life. It's there to make you feel good about yourself. It's like putting a suit on a shrivelled carrot and taking it out to the theatre and pretending it's someone important. The first step in self-liberation is to be free of self-respect. I understand why it's useful for some. When people have nothing, they can still have their pride. That's why the poor were given the myth of nobility, because the cupboards were bare. Are you listening to me? This is important, Jasper. I don't want you to have anything to do with nobility, pride, or self-respect. They're tools to help you bronze your own head.'

I sat on the ground with my legs crossed. I didn't even straighten my back. I slouched. They had to bend down to punch me in the jaw.

One of them got on his knees to do it. They took turns. They tried to get me to my feet; I let my body go limp. One of them had to hold me up, but I had become slippery and slid greasily through their fingers back onto the ground. I was still taking a beating, and my head was stunned by strong fists pounding at it, but the pummelling was sloppy, confused. Eventually my plan worked: they gave up. They asked what was wrong with me. They asked me why I wouldn't fight back. Maybe the truth was I was too busy fighting back tears to be fighting back people, but I didn't say anything. They spat at me and then left me to contemplate the colour of my own blood. Against the white of my shirt, it was a luminous red.

When I got home, I found Dad standing by my bed, staring witheringly at the newspaper clippings on the walls.

'Jesus. What happened to you?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'Let's get you cleaned up.'

'No, I want to see what happens to blood when you leave it overnight.'

'Sometimes it turns black.'

'I want to see that.'

I was just about to rip down the pictures of Uncle Terry when Dad said, 'I wish you'd take these down,' so of course I kept them right where they were. Then Dad said, 'This isn't who he was. They've turned him into a hero.'

Suddenly I found myself loving my degenerate uncle again, so I said, 'He *is* a hero.'

'A boy's father is his hero, Jasper.'

'Are you sure about that?'

Dad turned and snorted at the headlines.

'You can't know what a hero is, Jasper. You've grown up in a time when that word has been debased, stripped of all meaning.

We're fast becoming the first nation whose populace consists solely of heroes who do nothing but celebrate each other. Of course we've always made heroes of excellent sportsmen and -women – if you perform well for your country as a long-distance runner, you're heroic as well as fast – but now all you need to do is be in the wrong place at the wrong time, like that poor bastard covered by an avalanche. The dictionary would label him a survivor, but Australia is keen to call him a hero, because what does the dictionary know? And now *everyone* returning from an armed conflict is called a hero too. In the old days you had to commit specific acts of valour *during* war; now you just need to turn up. These days when a war is on, heroism seems to mean "attendance".'

'What's this got to do with Uncle Terry?'

'Well, he falls into the final category of heroism. He was a murderer, but his victims were well chosen.'

'I don't get it.'

Dad turned toward the window, and I could tell by the way his ears wiggled up and down that he was talking to himself in that weird way where he did the mouth movements but kept all the sound in. Finally he spoke like a person.

'People don't understand me, Jasper. And that's okay, but it's sometimes irritating, because they think they do. But all they see is the façade I use in company, and in truth, I have made very few adjustments to the Martin Dean persona over the years. Oh sure, a touch-up here, a touch-up there, you know, to move with the times, but it has essentially remained intact from day one. People are always saying that a person's character is unchangeable, but mostly it's the *persona* that doesn't change, not the person, and underneath that changeless mask exists a creature who's evolving like crazy, mutating out of control. I tell you, the most consistent person you know is more than likely a complete stranger to you, blossoming and sprouting

all sorts of wings and branches and third eyes. You could sit beside that person in an office cubicle for ten years and not see the growth spurts going on right under your nose. Honestly, anyone who says a friend of theirs hasn't changed in years just can't tell a mask from an actual face.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

Dad walked to my bed and, after doubling over the pillow, lay down and made himself comfortable.

'I'm saying it's always been a little dream of mine for someone to hear firsthand about my childhood. For instance, did you know that my physical imperfections almost did me in? You've heard the expression "When they made him, they threw away the mould"? Well, it was as if someone picked up a mould that had already been thrown away, and even though it was cracked and warped by the sun and ants had crawled inside it and an old drunk had urinated on it, they reused it to make me. You probably didn't know either that people were always abusing me for being clever. They'd say, "You're too clever, Martin, too clever by half, too clever for your own good." I smiled and thought they must be mistaken. How can a person be too clever? Isn't that like being too good-looking? Or too rich? Or too happy? What I didn't understand was that people don't think; they repeat. They don't process; they regurgitate. They don't digest; they copy. I had only a splinter of awareness back then that no matter what anybody says, choosing between the available options is not the same as thinking for yourself. The only true way of thinking for yourself is to create options of your own, options that don't exist. That's what my childhood taught me and that's what it should teach you, Jasper, if you hear me out. Then afterward, when people are talking about me, I'm not going to be the only one to know they are wrong, wrong, wrong. Get it? When people talk about me in front of us, you and I will be able to give each other sly, secret looks across

the room, it will be a real giggle, and maybe one day, after I'm dead, you'll tell them the truth, you'll reveal everything about me, everything I've told you, and maybe they'll feel like fools, or maybe they'll shrug and go, "Oh really, interesting," then turn back to the game show they were watching. But in any case, that's up to you, Jasper. I certainly don't want to pressure you into spilling the secrets of my heart and soul unless you feel it will make you richer, either spiritually or financially.'

'Dad, are you going to tell me about Uncle Terry or not?'

'Am I — what do you think I've just been saying?'

'I have absolutely no idea.'

'Well, sit down and shut up and I'll tell you a story.'

This was it. Time for Dad to open up and spill his version of the Dean family chronicles, his version that was contrary to the mythologising gossip of the nation. So he started to talk. He talked and talked nonstop until eight in the morning, and if he was breathing underneath all those words, I couldn't see it or hear it but I sure could smell it. When he'd finished, I felt as though I'd travelled through my father's head and come out somehow diminished, just slightly less sure of my identity than when I went in. I think, to do justice to his unstoppable monologue, it'd be better if you heard it in his own words – the words he bequeathed me which have become my own, the words I've never forgotten. That way you get to know two people for the price of one. That way you can hear it as I did, only partially as a chronicle of Terry Dean, but predominantly as a story of my father's unusual childhood of illness, near-death experiences, mystical visions, ostracism, and misanthropy, followed closely by an adolescence of dereliction, fame, violence, pain, and death.

Anyway, you know how it is. Every family has a story like this one.