

# **Whose Story is it? To Begin to Know**

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I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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# Abstract

This Doctorate of Creative Arts is in two parts: the first, a manuscript (now published; Allen & Unwin 2014) *To Begin to Know: Walking in the Shadows of my Father*; the second, an exegetical component *Whose Story is it: to begin to know*.

When I set out to write the manuscript, my father, Bernard Leser was still alive. In terms of the exegetical component, this was as professionally daunting as it was personally rewarding. Before he passed away, he read my manuscript, we negotiated sections, and he gave me his blessing. This took us both into a number of deep discussions around ethics, freedom of speech and ownership of stories. It is a tale that involves interrogating the depths of a hybrid memoir: his story and mine, with other family members also in the wings.

The exegesis is an attempt to position my memoir on an ethical spectrum, simply answering the question, whose story is it? It comes at a time in literary history when the subject of memoir and ethics has never been more polemical. My conclusion is that this is my story, but with important caveats attached, because no person's life is lived independently of others.

# **Part 1**

## **To Begin to Know: walking in the shadows of my father**

**A manuscript**

(published 2014 by Allen & Unwin, Sydney; this manuscript  
is the final pre-publication word document)

## THE DESERT PLACES

*Soon you will have forgotten all things; soon all things will have forgotten you ...*

*Marcus Aurelius*

I began this book out of love and disappointment for my father. I had wanted him to write his own story because I thought that if he could enter into a new dialogue with himself, he'd not only get to make sense of his life in new ways, he might even provide inspiration to others.

Filled with my own presumptions, I felt that my father's later life might have been more gratifying, less disappointing to him, had he been less guarded, better able to investigate his inner needs. That was my wish for him, but not his own wish for himself.

As with many men of his generation, and particularly men whose sense of the world was shaped by the horrors of Nazi Germany, my father had no real desire to probe what Robert Frost referred to as the 'desert places', the dark psychological regions of his own heart. He was afraid, I think, of that interior country, as I suspect we all are.

My father, Bernard Leser, left Germany as a boy on the eve of World War II and then, twenty years later, in 1959, launched Australian *Vogue* magazine, no small accomplishment when you consider that, at the time, the most stylish thing in Australia was probably the continental supper.

From 1976, he then went on to run British Condé Nast Publications, putting him in charge of magazines like *Vogue*, *Brides* and *House and Garden*. During that same period, he bought *Tatler* and *World of Interiors*, and, forty years after he'd left Germany, set up German *Vogue*, before being invited in 1987 to become president of Condé Nast Publications Inc, the magazine empire that included in its stable *Vogue*, *House and Garden*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker*, *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, *GQ*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Architectural Digest* and *Self*.

This put him behind the wheel of a fabulous global corporation, in the next office along, at Condé Nast's New York headquarters, from the Sun King himself, S.I. (Si) Newhouse Jr, the secretive, enigmatic publishing billionaire who had amassed one of the largest private fortunes in the world.

My father became the regent in the Newhouse Kingdom at a time when its magazines were rewriting the rules of American journalism, establishing a new celebrity culture throughout the English-speaking world.

By any measure it was an extraordinary career, and testament to the powers of charm, chance and the uncanny ability some people have to re-invent themselves.

I wanted him to write his story because it was a good story, possibly a great story, and, besides which, I could see his purpose faltering. After all his years on the mountain top, it seemed, at least from where I was standing, that he had lost his footing, and his view. This book would be a new project, a new routine, a new reason to get out of bed in the morning I told myself, and him.

But he never began writing, nor looked like doing so. In his late seventies and into his eighties he was finding greater companionship with the books that other men had written, and this is where he's stayed, in a way, for the past decade or so,

reliving his glory days with increasing wistfulness, buried inside another great man's biography, a double Scotch on the rocks often by his side.

So about ten years ago I offered to write his story for him, and although he deliberated on this for some time, it was an offer I believe he welcomed more than he cared to admit. He was proud of his achievements, proud of what he'd made of his life; and deep down I think he was both flattered and warmed by my gesture of filial devotion.

I began gingerly at first, and then with a certain gusto, wading into his years in Germany between the flames of two world wars, then into his early life in New Zealand. I stalled somewhere across the Tasman Sea, at the point in the narrative shortly before he arrived in Australia in 1947 with five pounds in his pocket. I could see the vast stretches I was going to have to cover if I was ever to do him justice—the sharp trajectory of a damaged life turned charmed and successful, sweeping across four continents, from Australia to Canada to London, back to Australia, over to London again, onto Europe and then New York, with a great flourishing of trumpets.

I baulked at the task. I couldn't help but wonder why, at age forty-six, after a lifetime spent trying to get out from under my father's considerable shadow, I would now deliberately place myself right back in it. Why would I spend years writing about my father's life, giving him all of my rapt attention, when I now had the opportunity—the duty even—to live my own? Wouldn't that be tantamount to dimming my own light in order to brighten his?

It all came to a head in London in 2005, when I met him for a few days on my way to Los Angeles to interview June Newton, the Australian-born widow of the late

fashion photographer, Helmut Newton. It was one of those moments of confluence that had often occurred between us since I'd first become a journalist, writing about a person my father happened to know. He and Helmut Newton had both ended up in Australia after fleeing Berlin on the eve of World War II. Newton had become one of the first photographers to work on Australian *Vogue*.

My father had also arrived in London from Sydney, but while I was jetlagged he embarked with vigour on a relentless social schedule—breakfasts, lunches, afternoon teas, pre-dinner cocktails, after-dinner nightcaps. The Garrick Club. Annabel's. Harry's Bar. Editors, publishers, old colleagues, new chums. My father was eighty. I was forty-nine. I could barely keep up.

One evening in his hotel room I told him I didn't think I could continue to write his life story. I was too weighed down by the demands of writing feature stories, trying to help raise two young daughters, dealing with sometimes crippling insomnia, grappling with the politics of a modern marriage.

I felt exhausted, besieged by doubts, undone by the thought of more travel. 'Dad, I just don't think I can do it,' I said. 'I don't have the time and I'm not sure now that I want to write about you.' And then, for the first time I could remember since I was a little boy, I began to cry in front of him.

I apologised for my failure, for having let him down. I told him I didn't feel worthy of the trust he had bestowed upon me, that I didn't think I was equipped for the task.

'It's alright,' he said, putting his hand on my shoulder, then hugging me. 'Just drop it. You've got enough on your plate.'

I did have enough on my plate, but the truth was I also had too many contradictory emotions swirling through me to write his story in a way my father would have wanted it written. I'd spent my working life looking for—and uncovering—other people's strengths and fragilities, whereas my father had spent most of his life promoting the former and concealing the latter. He had always possessed purpose and ambition. He had woken early and gone to bed late, often in a boozy haze of work pressure and conviviality, and in the hours between had presided over the most elite privately owned magazine publishing company on earth. This had given him access and status beyond the reach of most ordinary mortals. It had put him in regular contact with the most talked about magazine editors and newspaper proprietors in the world; placed him at dinner tables and cocktail parties with kings, queens and fashion empresses; provided him with hotel suites and first-class travel; surrounded him with the best and brightest, and also, of course, a coterie of flatterers and lickspittles. The list of eminent people he knew was endless and endlessly fascinating.

Bernard Leser had been 'the Man From Condé Nast', who'd naturally come to see his own identity as being inseparable from the company he served. 'We at Condé Nast have always ...' he would often declaim, as though the world really was an Edwardian play of *Upstairs Downstairs* dimensions.

My father had a more than healthy ego, but people loved him. They loved his magnetism and enthusiasm, his boundless energy. ('He invented the thirty-six-hour day,' one of his Australian colleagues once remarked.) They loved his tenacity, his panache, his salesmanship and his ability to motivate. Above all, they loved his kindness, the way he thought about people, put them together, sent them

encouraging notes, boosted their faith in themselves, mentored them for bigger and better things. This was his lifeblood—human relations, the personal touch—and these instincts flowed through him like a mighty river, propelling him around the globe, feeding his sense of self, filling him with confidence and good humour, giving him a sense that life really was a party with his name on every list. Or, at least, the important ones.

By 2002, however, eight years after handing over the reins in New York, he'd begun to show signs of depression. We were all concerned for him. Many of his friends had died; people had stopped calling for advice; his body was slowing down; and, increasingly, he was self-medicating with alcohol. His conversation was invariably laced with references to Condé Nast and all the things he had achieved in the top position; the important people he'd known, the careers he'd helped launch, all the individuals he'd motivated, the culture of excellence he'd nurtured, and, by contrast, the corrosion of character he could now see insinuating itself into the modern workplace.

He was right about much of this, but I wanted him to move forward with the satisfaction of having had a remarkable career; to harness those successes as a springboard for other explorations, rather than continuing to excavate the past.

He didn't seem able to do that, or to want to do that. Perhaps no one ever told him it would be wise to try, although I'm sure I hinted at it on more than one occasion. Every new meeting, every discussion, was an opportunity to replay old achievements, to inform whomever he was talking to of the position he'd once held. He'd been a global leader in his field and, by golly, he'd done some leading and inspiring in his time. This was all true, of course, but to me it sounded so limiting—

*and yes, often so tedious*—because he was more, much more, than just the summation of his working life.

My father has always wanted recognition (and who can blame him for that?) and so I thought that by writing a book about him I might spare him what writer Richard Freadman called ‘the indignity of oblivion’; all those years of clambering, striving, flourishing, trying to make a difference, to leave a mark. And for what? Just to vanish?

It was so that my father wouldn’t vanish that I took up the task of writing about him. But inevitably I began observing him like an interview subject, drafting questions for him, inspecting his wardrobe and his bathroom cabinets with the eye of a chronicler—or a burglar, as Janet Malcolm might suggest—rather than as the loving son I wanted to be.

‘My goodness,’ I’d think as I rifled through the 1001 Estée Lauder creams and Chanel colognes that lined the shelves of his bathroom cabinet, ‘imagine how this will look in print.’ I’d trawl through the work correspondence, the letters from friends and admirers, the old photographs, and I’d be forever thinking about how to make my father’s life live on the page.

In doing so I lost the joy of just being with him, of being with him for its own sake—because he was the man who’d brought me into the world and because we loved each other and there’d been years, way too many years, when we’d not been able to do just this: sit with each other in the quiet.

My father had become a book project instead of a man. A book with chapters and headlines and breakout quotes. A book that attempted to be fair and balanced

and of interest to people who might not necessarily have a skerrick of curiosity about him, or even know who he was, much less care.

I spent countless hours poring over my father's life and when that all proved too much—which it did—I turned to my mother's life, believing that because I'd spent way too long in the thrall of my father, I needed to balance the ledger. After my mother, I turned to her mother, my grandmother, and then to my grandmother's mother, until I ended up lost in the woods of Latvia where many of our relatives perished.

And it occurred to me, in the midst of these preoccupations, that the one person I was avoiding writing about was myself.

By this stage, I'd made my living for nearly twenty-five years writing about other people. Politicians, businessmen, bankers, media figures, lawyers, judges, artists, writers, poets, musicians, dancers, actors, theatre directors. I'd spent days and nights chronicling their exploits, winking their stories out of them, listening to their confessions—if and when they came; getting around them, behind them, across them, trying to challenge them, but also understand and honour them, to bring their lives to the page in ways that might not do them too much rough justice. Unless, of course, they deserved it—which, on more than a few occasions, they did.

Now I'd reached a point of wanting to try to write a different story, one that went to the core of a different kind of conversation—the kind you have when the ground shifts and you shine the searchlight on yourself. I wanted to write my own story—about family and the way grim memories can be passed down through the ages to seep into the very tissue of your being; about marriage—*my marriage*; about

ambition and ego—*my ambition and ego*—and how it might be possible to live independently of more shallow definitions of success.

Most journalists shy away from a pursuit like this, and rightly so. We pride ourselves on our non-alignment, our so-called objectivity, our capacity to set agendas, challenge authority, break new ground. The stories that matter are the stories of the day or the week—nation- or earth-defining stories on climate change or government corruption or the latest collapse in Middle Eastern negotiations. Or in these dumbing-down days of the early twenty-first century, stories of Angelina and Brad’s marriage and Britney’s stay in rehab and Mel’s drunken, anti-Semitic rants and Lindsay’s anorexia and, of course, Michael’s brilliant and grotesque Peter Pan rise and fall.

We don’t put *ourselves* on the line, certainly not in this way. Who would listen? Who would care? And to what purpose? To lay ourselves bare for all to see—to speak to all the rumblings and contradictions of the human heart that might invite the mirth and hilarity, if not outright scorn, of colleagues and friends?

This is no ordinary time. We know this in the same way an elephant knows a distant bull roar, or a bird takes flight long before the earth has begun to tremble. We are tuned to a bandwidth, a frequency, and it is in this heaving sea of atomic energy that we sense the threat. We might not be able to articulate it, but we know it in the most visceral parts of ourselves. This has been a time of great shifts, when the world’s economy has unravelled and the old kings of capitalism have been dethroned and millions of Americans have begun living in their cars and tents; a time when European cities have begun to smoulder all over again in their discontent, with

up to 120 million people now facing poverty and ruin, and when Pacific islands have sunk further and the Arctic ice caps melted faster than we ever feared possible.

And the shifts aren't just global. The year I resumed writing this book—after five years of indecision—I lost my job and my elder daughter left home, taking with her all the sweet melodies of her song-writing that had once floated from her bedroom.

It was the year when I started taking books of poetry and spirituality to bed with me instead of newspapers and magazines, looking for the sacred words that might explain the silent conversings of the heart.

It was the year I think I began to understand the pain of my parents' lives and the ways in which the sorrows of the old world shadowed them across the seas and down through the generations, to me and my children.

It was the year that one work project after another fell over and I ended up feeling as uncertain and directionless as I'd ever felt; the year I began sleeping during the day and taking the phone off the hook and taking long, aimless walks along the beach, hoping that no one would recognise me or, heaven forbid, ask me what I did for a living.

It was the year I realised that all the old ways of doing things no longer worked, not for me, not for my marriage, not for my community, not for this country, not for the planet. It was the year I stopped seeing the world mostly through my head and began trying to process it through my heart.

This was the year—how could it have taken this long? —that I truly began listening to birdsong: the ribald laughter of kookaburras, the fluting warble of

magpies, the strangled cry of the currawong—at all times of the day, but particularly in that sad half-light of dusk.

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I can think of plenty of other journalists in Australia who have had far more distinguished careers than mine; who have braved more warzones, won more awards, covered more political and economic cycles, and generally kept more abreast of the temper of the times than I've ever managed to do.

What this book is about is finding a way to use the personal as a vehicle for exploring bigger themes. The personal just happens to be mine. For all my working life it's been others—mostly people on the public stage, but not always—whose lives have influenced, inspired, united, divided and demanded our attention, however fleeting. The best of them were those whose lives offered up to us something deeper about the human condition, who took us to places of courage, ambition, guile, vanity, generosity, love, cruelty and a whole lot more.

Journalism has never just been about fact-gathering and storytelling. It has been about the exploration and celebration of ideas. At its best, according to the late, great American scribe David Halberstam, it is an ‘expression of restraint and judgement on a community’. Its practitioners, if they behave and think well, can be the ‘spiritual monitors of a community’, where trust and loyalty are built in equal measure.

This might seem laughable today, given the bad odour in which journalists are often held by the public, not to mention the end of the business model that once funded print journalism and the noble enterprise that is investigative reporting. But

there are any number of Australian journalists I know who hold—and deserve—this esteemed place in our society. They are smart and passionate, but also dispassionate when necessary, and they are brave and resilient too. They retain a sense of idealism, but they are also freethinkers, open to new ideas, allergic to the latest trend or to any notion of running with the pack.

There are others, though, who remain deeply cynical and angry with the world, as if all their years of reporting on other people's weaknesses, failings and peccadillos have confirmed their darkest suspicions of the human endeavour. They have spent so much time as prisoners to the deadline, locked in the castle of political and economic decision-making, playing the role of kingmaker or executioner, that their character, like those whom they report on, has become progressively undermined.

Every story is written through hidden filters, shaped by the culture of the newspaper or magazine that employs you, shaped by the impulses of the proprietor or editor who can hire or fire you, shaped by your own life experiences—by the things you have witnessed or not witnessed; by the information that has been revealed to you or not revealed; and by the motives of those revealing or not revealing.

I don't see how a journalist can write about another person's life unless he or she can come to grips with this, unless they understand the deep complexity of the human condition and how deeply conflicted and flawed we all are.

There are, of course, many people who, in the face of terror or terrible deeds, see the lines becoming clearer. They see themselves as having arrived at a point on the map closer to the truth. They know the right way to respond. They recognise

who thinks and acts like themselves, who is on their side and who isn't. They can say with absolute clarity and conviction where the moral and ethical boundaries should be laid.

I wish sometimes that this clarity and conviction was still with me; that the ability to know things with certainty had not been usurped by the torturous self-examinations that now seem to accompany almost every act of writing. And yet I know these torturous examinations help me to understand not just what others long for, but what I long for in myself—which is why, I suppose, this is the story of my own longing. A longing to understand my history, but a longing to escape it. A longing for freedom, but a longing for true commitment. A longing for the wisdom of the ages, but a longing—still adolescent to its core—to inhabit the land of the young. A longing for music. A longing for a true relationship with silence. A longing for home. A longing for places that don't look at all like home. A longing to keep my daughters close. A longing to let them go so that they might hazard themselves in the world as they're meant to do. A longing to be good. A longing to be a little bad. A longing to honour my father who, like Hamlet contemplating the exhumed skull of Yorrick, 'hath borne me on his back a thousand times'. A longing to abandon this father ship in order to steer my own sometimes wayward course. A longing for some kind of compact between all these blessed contradictions.

## A FATEFUL MEETING

My family has many stories and a few of them are dramatic in the way that many stories from many families are dramatic.

We make of these stories what we will. Often we bury them in our secret graves, we glide over them, or we rehearse them endlessly until we become one with them, because without these stories we might not know who we are.

The story that has long held the greatest power for me is the one about my paternal grandfather, Kurt Leser, a German Jew whose life was saved by a Nazi on the eve of World War II.

My grandfather had fought in the Battle of Verdun in 1916, the longest and costliest battle of the Great War, and although he was on the losing side, he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class for saving another man's life in the trenches. He was then offered an officer's commission if he agreed to convert to Christianity. He refused this commission, not because he was a devout or even practising Jew—he hardly ever went to synagogue in his life—but because he felt it would have been an act of hypocrisy to convert.

On my father's side our family could trace its German Jewish heritage as far back as the Thirty Years War of 1618–1648 and the Treaty of Westphalia that followed. As far as my grandfather was concerned, his German pedigree was as good as any Lutheran, Presbyterian or Catholic German's. He was either officer material or he wasn't, and seeing as he was born a Jew, he'd die one too.

By 1938, the head of the notorious Brownshirts, or SA (Sturmabteilung), for the region surrounding Sondershausen, was the same man whose life my grandfather had saved at the Battle of Verdun.

In early November he called my grandfather at home and said: ‘Kurt, I need to see you.’

‘Where?’ my grandfather replied.

‘At our usual place in the park.’

This was the city park in Sondershausen, and in 1985 my father took me there to show me where these two old World War I comrades—one a Jew, the other a Nazi—had had their fateful meeting.

My father and I sat on a park bench looking through the birch trees to the lake where children were playing with their toy boats. Nearby was a restaurant and the remnants of a small amphitheatre where locals had gone to hear Brahms and Beethoven concerts on weekends. It was a peaceful and civilised setting.

My father held my hand as he recounted the story that his own father had told him when he was a teenager.

‘Kurt,’ the SA chief said, ‘you saved my life twenty two years ago; I’m saving yours now. You must leave Germany as soon as possible—in the next few days.’

‘But what about my son and my partner?’ my grandfather asked.

‘Don’t worry about them. I’ll make sure they’re okay.’

Within two days my grandfather had packed his bags, never to return to Germany. Almost immediately, the country was plunged into an orgy of violence that would become known as Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. From 9 to 10 November, all over Germany, synagogues were set ablaze, tombstones desecrated,

and Jewish homes and businesses looted. In cities, towns and villages, Jews were set upon by prowling Aryan thugs. Some families lost everything that night. Some never saw their loved ones again.

The event that triggered this night of destruction had occurred in Paris two days earlier, following the deportation of eighteen thousand Jews from the Reich, most of them to Poland. Among those transported were seventeen-year-old Herschel Grynszpan's mother and father who, without warning, had been ordered from their home and shipped by cattle car to the Polish border. Their son decided to take revenge on the Germans. On the morning of 7 November 1938 he walked into the German embassy in Paris and fired five shots at close range at the country's Third Secretary, Ernst vom Rath. Three of the shots missed their target; two of them lodged in the diplomat's stomach. Two days later, vom Rath was dead.

Hitler's minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, wasted little time, his newspaper *Der Angriff* announcing: 'From this vile deed arises the imperative demand for immediate action against the Jews, with the most severe consequences.'

My grandfather's friend obviously knew what these consequences were going to be. He would be leading the charge. Yet he decided, at huge risk to himself, to repay the gift of life to a Jew.

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My father was the only child of six marriages. Both his father Kurt and his mother Ellen had married twice after their divorce from each other in 1929, but none of these subsequent marriages would produce another son or daughter. Six marriages across four countries and only my father to show for it. He used to joke that his

parents and step-parents took one look at him and decided the risks of another child were far too great.

By contrast, my father's great-grandmother, Seraphine Leser, had borne fifteen children, but sometime in the late 1880s she had got out of bed in Sondershausen, walked to her fourth-floor window and thrown herself out. Pregnant with her sixteenth child, this long-suffering wife of Moses Leser had decided she could take no more. Fifteen children perhaps, but sixteen—that was beyond all endurance.

My father was born in Berlin on 15 March 1925 at a hospital in the fashionable western part of the city. His arrival coincided with that giddy, golden period that flickered briefly into life during the days of the Weimar Republic. Bertolt Brecht had just emerged as a powerful new presence in German theatre; Fritz Lang was establishing himself as a pre-eminent filmmaker; Christopher Isherwood was laying the foundations for *Cabaret*; the Bauhaus architectural movement was beginning to flourish. And my father was entering a world that had gone mad and would soon erupt again, but, for the moment, was offering its citizens a few years of almost hallucinatory respite.

With the currency scrapped, people no longer had to cart wheelbarrows full of deutschmarks to the bakery just to buy a loaf of bread. There were still beggars everywhere and the wave of suicides that had gripped Germany at the height of the economic collapse had only just begun to subside. But poverty was receding, if only for the briefest of periods before the Great Depression. For the first time in years it was possible to imagine a future, despite the fact that a former Austrian house painter and part-time tramp by the name of Adolf Hitler had just been released from

eighteen months in prison, the ink from his hateful tract, *Mein Kampf*, barely dry on his hands.

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It says something about a child's ignorance of his parents' lives that it wasn't until I was in my forties that I began to fully appreciate what it must have meant to be born a Jew in Germany in the mid-1920s and to have spent one's childhood under the heel of the jackboot. Or what it must have been like to have become aware, as did my father, that his country not only no longer wanted him but, worse, wanted him dead.

Like every other Jewish child of my generation I'd grown up with the knowledge that something monstrous and unique had happened to our parents' generation and that we, their children, had somehow been miraculously spared. But having said that, I'd never truly taken the imaginative leap into the depths of evil. I'd never truly conceived of a childhood set to never-ending martial music and drums, and goosestepping SS parades. Nor had I ever tried to conjure up the terror that mass hysteria creates, or the loneliness that being a pariah instils in the marrow of your bones. I'd never known, never smelt, this kind of fear and, to be sure, my father had never talked much about it.

Although good with words, my father, like most men of his generation—particularly German men, perhaps—was never much given to expressions of emotion, especially emotion that had long ago been buried. You had to prise things out of him or, better still, sit patiently in the troubled waters of his silence until ripples broke the surface. At least that's what it often felt like. Even then, he would articulate his thoughts only with the kind of formal precision you might expect from

a history professor declaiming on the sweep of Prussian history. Consciously constructed rather than coming to you in an artless, natural way.

German men, we are told, prefer to suffer in silence, and in this way, I suppose, my father was a lot like his own father. Kurt Leser was a man of supreme elegance and charm, a man who could disarm a room full of people instantly, including every woman in it—but a man who, I've come to see, carried around inside himself all the trace elements of war, persecution and exile.

At the end of World War I he had returned to a shattered nation. On the Continent eight million men had been killed in the fighting, seven million had been left permanently disabled, and another fifteen million seriously wounded. Throughout Europe another five million people had succumbed to disease and famine—and that was before the influenza epidemic of 1918–1919 carried off millions more. In total, some sixty million people had died—and that's excluding those in Russia. Of this unprecedented squandering of humanity, the noted historian Paul Kennedy wrote in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*: 'There is no known way of measuring the personal anguish and the psychological shocks involved in such a human catastrophe, but it was easy to see why the participants—statesmen as well as peasants—were so deeply affected by it all.'

My recollections of my grandfather are scant but I remember him for his handsome face, aquiline nose and brushed-back silver hair, and for the way his shoulders used to hunch forward when he walked, as if he was carrying some monumental load that I could never see. He used to smile at me and wiggle his ears whenever I asked him to, his face as still as granite.

I suppose my grandfather was a sad and remote figure, but perhaps it was just the pain he was in. I had no idea—until my father told me years later—that one side of his body and his upper legs were still full of shrapnel. He could barely move without wincing, yet he never complained.

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Straight after the Great War, my grandfather went to work in Berlin for his great-uncle, Eduard Leser, who was then running a company called Meyerhofter, a successful textile business turning out high-quality silks and woollen fabrics for the European market. Eduard Leser was known as the Silk King of Germany and he owned a big mansion on Lake Wannsee, where my father used to holiday occasionally as a small boy, not far from the conference room in which Reinhard Heydrich and his fellow criminals from the Third Reich would later devise their ‘Final Solution’ for European Jewry.

A few years later my grandfather took up with another uncle, Egon Leser, also in the textile business, and was put in charge of a company called Eduard Gers, which manufactured wool for hand-knitting. Egon Leser had made a fortune prospecting for gold in South Africa before returning to Germany prior to the war. A shrewd businessman, he’d somehow managed to protect his savings at a time when the majority of Germans were losing their livelihoods virtually overnight.

Egon Leser lived in Dresden but his factories were based in Berlin and Sondershausen, a salt-mining town 180 kilometres south-west of Berlin, near the historic cultural centre of Weimar. Egon hated Sondershausen with a passion. He hated its smallness, its provincialism, its isolation from the commercial centres of Europe, but he needed someone there to run what had become a vital part of his

operations. The company had thousands of home workers scattered throughout the town and surrounding villages, people who would be paid to knit garments according to the company's specifications, before being on-sold to retail stores throughout Germany. My grandfather was good at sketching garments and, more importantly, he was trustworthy and eager to get ahead. When his uncle invited him to become a partner in his business, he jumped at the chance.

It was 1927 and Germany was enjoying a renaissance under the most liberal regime in all of Europe. Although the Weimar Republic was destined to fail spectacularly, these were the years when anything seemed possible, particularly in Berlin, then a rival to Paris as the most exciting city on earth. The Great Depression was still two years away, and the Nazi Party still a rump organisation of country yokels and gangsters.

My grandfather was looking to the future. Three years earlier he had married my grandmother, Ellen Weiss, in a synagogue in Berlin, and the following year, 1925, Ellen had given birth to my father. After the devastation and deprivations of war, Kurt Leser was anxious to establish a life for himself and his family—except that his marriage to Ellen was never going to work.

My paternal grandmother was a woman of beauty and considerable style, a product of middle-class Berlin society with an entirely different temperament to my grandfather's. She was serious-minded, wedded to the traditions of Judaism but also a woman of high culture. Her home was a salon of sorts, where she and her friends would gather to sing and play piano. My father remembers her as good-natured, even-tempered and gregarious.

Kurt was more humorous, but also more reserved. He revelled in his solitude—partly, I suspect, because of the constant pain from his war injuries. Books were his friends and he could converse widely on the subjects that interested him, mainly politics and history. My father would become more and more like him as he aged.

And there was something else. As my grandfather was to later tell my father, he was never in love with my grandmother but, rather, her younger sister Gerda. This union could never be realised, however, because Ellen and Gerda's parents insisted their elder daughter marry first, in accordance with Jewish custom.

I suppose my grandfather thought he could make things right. He was wrong, and his mistake would prove costly to them both, but even more so to my father who would spend his formative years—from the age of three to fourteen—in a motherless home.

In 1928, my grandmother became the centre of a village scandal after it was discovered she'd been having an affair with a Czech actor. My grandfather had also had affairs—numerous affairs, apparently—but this was Germany in the early part of the twentieth century and there was no question that if either of them was to do the leaving it would be the errant wife, not husband.

Over the years I have given a lot of thought to how his mother's absence must have shaped my father's life. I can picture their three-storey house on Von Hindenburg Strasse, and the garden full of apple trees and chirping birds, the surface comforts that were theirs—the car and driver for my grandfather, as well as the governess, housekeeper and cook—but also the glaring absence of a mother whom my father would only see in Berlin twice a year.

When I asked him one day to describe his earliest memory he referred immediately to this period—how when he was nearly three and a half years old his mother had left Sondershausen. ‘I remember her packing her cases and I remember the tearful goodbye and that was it,’ he said.

She didn’t tell my father why she was leaving; only that she had to go and that it was best if his father, my grandfather, looked after him. She cried as she packed her bags and later, too, when she boarded the train for Berlin. There was no conversation about this between my father and his.

For the next two years my father never saw his mother, although she regularly sent him letters. By the time he was six or seven, however, he was taking a train to Berlin alone to see her.

He was not yet eight years old when President Von Hindenburg—the man who’d given our family’s street its name—summoned Adolf Hitler to the Chancellery and bestowed on him the title of Chancellor of the Reich. It was 30 January 1933 and a political earthquake had just convulsed a nation of sixty-six million people. Almost immediately Hitler was issuing daily tirades against Jews, and mobs were now being given carte blanche to break into Jewish homes at night.

Almost from day one no Jewish musician was allowed to perform in Germany, nor were Jewish poets allowed to have their work recited. In the city of Breslau, Jewish lawyers were forbidden to appear in court; in Potsdam, Jewish judges were summarily dismissed; and in Thuringia itself—the state in which my father and grandfather lived—an organisation called the Association of Jewish Citizens was banned because it had dared to criticise the National Socialist government.

By April 1933 all Jewish businesses were boycotted, concentration camps institutionalised and an unprecedented education campaign unleashed against Jewish citizens.

‘A whole nation,’ wrote Sebastian Haffner in his devastating memoir, *Defying Hitler*, ‘was turned into a pack of hunting hounds.’ As early as March 1933, to fear for the life of a Jewish (person) was not unreasonable—even if the fear turned out to be groundless.

Every day one looked around and someone else had gone and left no trace. At some point in the summer the newspapers carried a list of thirty or forty names of famous scientists or writers; they had been proscribed, declared to be traitors to the people and deprived of their citizenship.

More unnerving was the disappearance of a number of quite harmless people ... the radio announcer whose voice one had heard every day ... the familiar actors and actresses who had been a feature of our lives disappeared from one day to the next ... Brilliant young Hans Otto, who had been the rising star of the previous season, lay crumpled in the yard of an SS barracks. He had thrown himself out of a fourth-floor window in a moment when the guards had been distracted. A famous cartoonist, whose harmless drawings had brought laughter to the whole of Berlin every week, committed suicide, as did the master of ceremonies of a well-known cabaret.

There was also the burning of books in April and the disappearance of contemporary German literature from bookshops and libraries. Certain newspapers and journals simply vanished, while those that kept going—many distinguished broadsheets with

strong democratic traditions—were reduced to crude mouthpieces for the Nazi propaganda machine.

And yet, as Haffner also observed: ‘It [was] typical of the early years of the Nazi regime that the whole façade of everyday life remained virtually unchanged. The cinemas, theatres and cafés were full. Couples danced in the open air and in dance halls. People strolled down the streets.’

To my father, a small asthmatic boy of eight, the appointment of Hitler as chancellor hardly seemed a shattering event, especially when compared to the divorce of his parents. My grandfather still went to work each day and came home each night for dinner. He still employed more than a thousand home workers and maintained a lifestyle which was the envy of most Germans. And his son, awkward and bespectacled though he was, continued to ride his bicycle to school and play with his friends as though nothing had happened.

But the signs were increasingly ominous. My father’s school principal began wearing a swastika on his lapel, even though he was no Nazi supporter, and by 1935 the Nuremberg Laws had, almost overnight, stripped Jews of their citizenship rights, as well as their right to marry or have sexual relations with German nationals. My grandfather’s family lawyer was forced to close his practice.

Did my grandfather meet quietly with other Jewish men in Sondershausen to discuss this? Did he start salting away money for what was surely coming?

Apparently he did. My grandfather knew a man in Prague, a friend of Jan Masaryk, the Czech foreign minister, who agreed to help him transfer his money from Prague to London. Every time my grandfather went to Prague—and that was twice a year, to visit one of the spas in the Bohemian countryside—he would carry

with him wads of cash for this courageous Czech man to then cable to London. This was the money that would eventually give my family its new beginning on the other side of the world.

In 1935 my grandfather was still clinging stubbornly to the belief that the nightmare would pass. Like so many other Jews, he couldn't imagine the unimaginable. He couldn't believe that the birthplace of Bach, Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller and Einstein, his very own birthplace, had—in the words of William L. Shirer, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*—‘turned down a dark and savage road from which there was to be no return’.

My grandfather had his mind on other matters. He'd fallen in love with Lilly Katz, a woman from the nearby town of Wildungen, and in 1934 he'd married her. ‘I adored her,’ my father told me. ‘She was a lovely person, very soft and very intelligent. She was lovely to be with and she was lovely to me. Very warm and affectionate. She took me to the cinema and out for cake. It wasn’t for long but I remember it well.’

Soon after the marriage, Lilly was diagnosed with throat cancer. By 1936 she was dead, depriving my father of his second mother in five years.

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In the summer of 1936, the year of the Berlin Olympics, my father took the nearly two-hour train trip to visit his mother in the German capital. I have often tried to picture the scene that would have greeted this eleven-year-old Jewish boy. All the towns and villages ablaze with flags and swastikas. The stirring sounds of military music, and the sight of saluting Nazi processions.

Berlin had been awarded the Games five years earlier—before the IOC could grasp what Germany was about to become—and Hitler was keen to exploit the moment. Here was the Third Reich's opportunity to showcase before the family of nations the superiority of the master race, its chance to promote the ideology and efficiency of National Socialism. Gone for the moment were the anti-Semitic posters and signs saying JEWS NOT WELCOME. Instead, there was the pretence of civility and a whole new Olympic village thrown into the bargain.

My father could barely contain his excitement when he learnt his father had obtained tickets for the two of them to see the great black American athlete, Jesse Owens, run the 100-yard final. Owens was then the most famous athlete in the world, the fastest man alive over 100 and 200 yards, as he was to prove again that Berlin summer by winning four gold medals.

My father would often recall the heart-stopping moment when Hitler refused to shake Owens' hand after the black American had blitzed the field in the 100-yard final.

'There would have been 100,000 people in the stadium,' he told me. 'It was tense, exciting and one could see Hitler and Goering and all the major figures in their deluxe seats. And all the Brownshirts and the SS in their black uniforms and thousands of swastikas everywhere.'

'The winners went up to receive their medals from the president of the IOC and they were then ushered towards the bigwigs of the German government. I remember Goering shaking Jesse Owens' hand but Hitler turned his back. I was perplexed by this but overtaken by the excitement of his win. That's what everybody was talking about.'

Later Hitler would tell one of his subordinates, 'The Americans should be ashamed of themselves letting Negroes win their medals for them. Do you really think that I will allow myself to be photographed shaking hands with a Negro?'

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My father began attending secondary school at the end of the 1936 summer holidays. It was an unhappy experience. As one of only a few Jewish children still left in the school, he was regularly teased and shunned by most of his peers.

In all the conversations I have had with him over the years about this period of his life, I think this is where I have felt his hurt most deeply. He explained this best to me one day while on holiday in north Queensland, sitting under a tropical sky.

'Let's say from August 1936 things became unpleasant. For instance, during recess and lunch breaks, no one would play with me. I would be very much on my own. In fact, I used to go home for lunch and then come back again. I was rather isolated and I couldn't be part of the soccer team or any of the sporting teams; also I wasn't part of the Hitler Youth movement to which all German boys and girls belonged, and I was very sorry about that because it seemed a lot of fun. They went out camping and barbecued sausages at night. I knew that my father was a highly decorated army veteran so I couldn't understand why we were treated differently. It was all very puzzling, and I felt very lonely.'

Did people call him names? I asked.

'Yes, yes, yes, they called me stinking Jew and this and that and the other. They called me names but there was no physical violence.'

The other children weren't allowed to play with my father. Only Gerhard Braun, now his oldest friend, dared to defy this decree, stealing away to Von

Hindenburg Strasse after school to spend time with him in secret, occasionally bringing other friends with him. My father never forgot his kindness.

By early 1937 my grandfather had been advised by the principal that it was no longer possible for my father to remain at school. Jews were no longer welcome. In the winter of 1937, my father was sent to a Jewish boarding school in Coburg, 150 kilometres south of Sondershausen in the state of Bavaria. For many children this would have seemed like one more loss; for my father it was a welcome relief. For the first time in years he would have friends. He would identify with other children in similar predicaments. He would be shielded from the growing menace that was swirling around the Jewish population although, here too, there was only so much protection the boarding school could offer.

Scorched into my father's memory is the time a gang of young Nazi hoods set upon him and his friends as they were riding their bikes in the forest outside Coburg. It was the first and only time my father was ever in a brawl, and by his own sunny account he acquitted himself well.

'They saw us and said, "You must be filthy Jews from Internat Hirsch". And they attacked us. I think there were about fourteen of us and about thirty of them.

'I was one of the youngest and smallest in our group but we had some pretty big people on our side, including our leader, who was big and blond and looked like a Nazi himself. He said to them, "I'll show you what we are," and he turned to us and said, "Let's give them hell." And we beat them and we were very happy. We made mince meat of them and they turned around and shot off.'

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In April 1938 my father had his bar mitzvah at a synagogue in Berlin. The general mood in the city was one of terrible foreboding. A month earlier—on 14 March, the day before my father's thirteenth birthday—Hitler had made his triumphal march into Austria, marking the end of the Austrian nation. Austrian Jews were now emigrating en masse if they could afford to, encouraged by the new Office for Jewish Emigration, headed by Adolf Eichmann. Others were choosing a more drastic course. Within one month, 500 Jews had committed suicide, including a family of six who reportedly shot themselves in a Viennese neighbourhood rather than face further torments at the hands of SS henchmen.

In Germany, Jewish people were now the forbidden caste. At the very time my father was smoking his first cigarette on his Aunt Alma's verandah, having just fulfilled his bar mitzvah obligations, thousands of his fellow Jews were being arrested and shipped off to concentrations camps. All over the country Nazi storm troopers were hanging posters with obscene depictions of Jews being tortured and maimed. Cafés and cinemas were subject to frequent raids, Jewish shop windows repeatedly smashed. No one was safe.

And yet for my father there was one small comfort to be had during that cold spring of 1938: his bar mitzvah had brought his parents together under the same roof for the first time in ten years. Appreciating how difficult it would be for his sister Alma and her family to travel to Sondershausen, not to mention the rabbi officiating at the service, my grandfather had agreed to have the bar mitzvah in Berlin. It would be the last time Kurt and Ellen ever saw each other.

Seven months later my grandfather left Germany without telling my father. There was no way he could. The following year, my father said goodbye to his

mother at the Zoo train station in Berlin, a tearful, gut-wrenching farewell before she departed for Bolivia, the only country that would agree to take her. He had no idea whether he would see her again.

‘It was very emotional,’ he told me one day. ‘Very sad.’

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A few days after my grandfather left Germany, Jews were summarily evicted from orphanages, hospitals and old people’s homes and, by 12 November, all Jewish children were barred from attending school, my father among them. On the night of Kristallnacht, German authorities closed down my father’s Jewish boarding school and ordered all the students paraded through the streets of Coburg. He was thirteen at the time and remembers the night as if it were yesterday:

‘The Gauleiter, the chief of the local SS, came round and gave orders for the school to be closed and for all the boys over the age of sixteen to be sent to Dachau concentration camp. At that time Dachau was not an extermination camp, it was a very basic, primitive camp. [“Empty huts in a gravel pit,” wrote one survivor.] But because I was under sixteen and so was my cousin Gerhard, we were frogmarched from school through the town, between jeering hordes of Nazis who were throwing stones and spitting at us.

‘We were then put into a gymnasium which was part of a youth hostel and made to sit there on bare boards for two nights. We were just given dry bread and water and then after two nights and one day we were all allowed to go back to our respective cities, towns, homes.’

Kristallnacht was, of course, to mark the point of no return in Germany’s modern history. It was at this juncture that it became horrifyingly clear to the Jewish

population that something unique and evil was at work. The Germany they had known had been extinguished, and not since medieval times was such barbarism given free rein.

I write this now more for my daughters and those of their generation than for readers acquainted with this gruesome chapter of history. Before I started to do so I'd thought I'd known my own family's history. I thought I had understood the horror which had lodged itself deep inside the collective Jewish soul.

I'd noticed—and absorbed—the collective summoning at the Pesach table of all the critical moments in Jewish history: the bondage of Egypt, the destruction of Judah, the Maccabean fight for survival, the crematoria of Europe. I'd duly noted my maternal grandmother's icy reproof when I had bought my first car, a Volkswagen beetle.

I thought I'd understood what it meant to be Jewish. I was hopelessly wrong. I don't think words could ever come close to describing what was beginning to happen to a defenceless people nearly eighty years ago. I don't think the moral imagination could ever truly apprehend that. Not unless you were there, and even then it seemed inconceivable.

From the night of 9 November 1938 onwards, German Jews were forced to pay for the destruction that had been heaped upon them, as well as pay an extra collective fine of one billion marks. They were to be removed entirely from the German economy, their businesses, properties, artworks and jewellery transferred into Aryan hands. They were to be banned from shopping, eating in restaurants, owning cars or pets, and visiting public libraries, cinemas and swimming pools. They were to be compelled towards the ghetto and beyond.

As Field Marshal Hermann Goering was to tell a cabinet meeting at the time, 'I would not like to be a Jew in Germany.'

At the age of thirteen my father had become an outcast, a terrible burden for any child to bear and one which he found almost impossible to talk about in the years to come, unless urged and prodded in that direction.

When he returned home to Sondershausen on 12 November, after the closing of his school, his father was already in America, trying to arrange visas for his now terrified family, including my father, my grandfather's sister Alma, Alma's son, Gerhard, and my father's great-aunt Sophie. There was also Ernie, the woman my grandfather had appointed to work for him a year earlier and to whom he would soon propose marriage. Ernie Cheikowsky—the third Mrs Kurt Leser—would prove crucial to my father's survival.

My father told me, 'She was the one who organised our departure and our immigration and the moving of our furniture and all the documentation. She was the one who negotiated with the SA.' And by SA, he meant my grandfather's friend.

My father had no idea that his own father had decided to leave Germany for good until he returned from Coburg. He had seen him a couple of weeks earlier—when my grandfather had visited him at school, just before the country had erupted into anti-Jewish violence. There had been no hint of his intentions. 'He told me he was going to America and England; that he was going to be very active in working out where we were going because we were going to leave Germany. He didn't tell me he wasn't coming back.'

It is difficult for me to reconcile myself to my grandfather's decision. No doubt he was convinced that unless he left Germany immediately, no one would get

out, and that this was his—and his family's—only possible choice. But to leave his only son behind, knowing he would never return, and to have no guarantee—except the word of the SA chief—that he could secure safe passage for him, is a decision I'm not sure I would have taken. Less Sophie's choice, more Giant Leap of Faith.

For the next six months—between November 1938 and April 1939—my father lived at home in the care of a woman he barely knew. Like all other Jewish children he was now barred from attending school. He seldom went out because in the streets Jews were hunted down, abused and beaten. It was not uncommon to see bonfires blazing in neighbourhoods where they lived, their prayer books, Torah scrolls and philosophical texts hurled onto the funeral pyres.

As many as 150,000 German and Austrian Jews had already fled. Thousands more had been evicted, Aryanised or sent to concentration camps. My grandfather, having prevaricated, delayed and probably justified to himself countless times between 1933 and 1938 why he should stay put, was now desperately seeking visas from three countries. His choices—in order of preference—were America, Australia and New Zealand, but America had already begun tightening its rules of admission in response to the increasing number of refugees. Australia, too, had left little doubt as to its thinking with respect to the Jewish plight. ‘It will no doubt be appreciated,’ Australian delegate T.W. White told an international conference on refugees in Switzerland in July 1938, ‘that as we have no racial problem we are not desirous of importing one.’

It was New Zealand that finally came to the rescue, a case—if ever there was one—of geography coming to the rescue of history. In the late 1800s my father's

great-aunt Sophie (or Issy as she was known) had married Hermann Braun, a brilliant businessman by all accounts, and a man with an unquenchable pioneering spirit. In 1868 Braun had set sail for the South Pacific from Sondershausen and ended up founding a company in Auckland called Brown and Barratt, which was to become one of New Zealand's leading importers and wholesalers of high-quality groceries, spirits and wines. (A passionate Anglophile all his life, Hermann had changed his name from Braun to Brown shortly after stepping on to New Zealand soil.)

In the late 1890s, following the death of his first wife, Brown had married Issy Leser, one of the fifteen children born to the unfortunate Seraphine Leser and, soon after, he had been appointed honorary German consul to Auckland by Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor von Bismarck.

Brown had held that position until he'd decided to return to Germany in 1911, but so deeply affected was he by his South Pacific experience that he'd re-named his Victorian-style manor in Sondershausen Villa Zealandia, furnishing one of the rooms with Maori art and weapons of war. (All this was confiscated by the Nazis in 1938 and, despite efforts on the part of our family, it was never returned by the Communist East German government.)

Hermann Brown died in Sondershausen in 1918 with seven-eighths of his fortune appropriated by the New Zealand government. Under the *Enemy Alien Act* of 1914 it seized the money and put the remaining one-eighth in trust for my family. This would later prove crucial to their survival.

Without knowing it, Hermann Braunn had taken a branch of the Leser family tree and transplanted it to New Zealand, setting in motion a relationship with that country that would continue well into the twenty-first century.

In the late 1890s, Brown had encouraged two of his brothers-in-law, Max and Gustav Leser, to emigrate to New Zealand, in order to capitalise on the gains he'd already made. These two brothers of Aunt Issy's had established a trading post in the country's North Island, where they'd sold food, blankets and whisky to the Maori. They'd made a small fortune, enough to enable them to act as guarantors for my grandfather and father on the eve of World War II.

Gustav Leser even went to Wellington to argue for my father and grandfather's admission, an act of decency that almost certainly saved my father's life. The equation was simple: without permits from New Zealand, none of the family would have been allowed to leave Berlin, given that both Australia and America had already turned them down.

On 4 April 1939, five months before the outbreak of World War II, my father, together with his aunt, cousin, great-aunt and Ernie, flew from Germany via Amsterdam to England, where they boarded a ship for Auckland. They flew from Tempelhof, the same airport that would soon launch a thousand Luftwaffe bombing missions over Europe.

## LITTLE BIGHORN

I remember at the age of four or five hearing a calamitous sound coming from the bathroom, strangling the morning stillness with its desperate, primal fury. It was my father dry-retching over the basin—AAAREGHCHU, AAREGHCHU—the noise reverberating through the bathroom wall into my bedroom.

Some people wake to Mozart or pneumatic drills or the gossip and tweeting of birds. I used to wake to the sound of my father heaving from stress. For up to ten minutes I would listen to these convulsions, until suddenly the noise would stop and I would get up, slightly shaken, bathed in my own sweat.

‘Are you okay, Daddy?’

‘Sure,’ he would reply, in tones so reassuring I found myself wondering if I’d actually imagined it all.

Most mornings were like this—his loud disturbances, my anxious inquiries and then the gentle assurances that all was well with the world. That’s when I started to equate success with tension. It seemed to me you couldn’t have one without the other. You couldn’t possibly rise to the top of your profession—in his case magazine publishing—unless you were having a bilious attack each morning.

My father was urbane and full of unquenchable ambition, but with all the repressed unhappiness of his unmentioned past. I must have intuited this from the time I was young because I used to write him letters when he was away on work trips, hoping, perhaps, that my words would touch the sides of a sadness I didn’t quite understand.

My darling Daddy,

I miss you terribly and I'm longing to see you again. A lot has happened while you've been away. First of all I got into the football team which I hope you are very happy with. Secondly I went to Richard Hossel's party and we saw at the pictures The Murderous Row which was very sexy.

Please do me a favour and don't bust yourself all the time and have a bit of a good time. After all you're not in Hong Kong all the time. We have been having a few tests at school in which some quite good and some quite bad [sic]. Thank you very much for your lovely postcard which I thought was lovely.

You don't know how much I miss you and I hope you miss me to [sic]. Please come back safe, happy and well.

All my love

Your loving son,

David

What strikes me most about this letter now—apart from its unabashed tenderness—is how, even then, at the age of eleven, I was worried about the stress my father was carrying. *Please do me a favour and don't bust yourself all the time.* It's a big thing for a young boy to ask of his father. Perhaps I was just mimicking my mother, who was forever imploring him to slow down, go out less, say no more often. But he couldn't. He'd been programmed to keep moving from the time he fled Germany.

For years my father would never admit he was born in Germany, that he could speak German almost as well as English. It reminded him too much of his own

pain and torment. He was not the little boy whose mother had left the family home in 1928, or the young Jew marched through the streets of Coburg while Nazis jeered and spat and pelted stones at him, shouting, *Juden heraus, Juden heraus* (Jews out, Jews out). He was not the teenager who'd been forced out of his country, arriving in New Zealand in 1939 with little English, no friends and precious few memories worth preserving.

Forty years later, my father would return to launch German *Vogue* magazine. For a year prior to its launch in September 1979 he travelled the length and breadth of West Germany, meeting with the heads of department stores and people in the advertising, fashion and cosmetics industries.

Throughout his travels he found himself willing to speak his native tongue again, but never explaining how it was that he spoke German so well. 'I felt much more secure as time elapsed,' he told me once, 'but also at that point I kind of got a kick out of being Jewish and starting an enterprise on behalf of a leading company in its field. I also liked working with a younger generation who hadn't been tarred by Hitler. I might have occasionally reflected on what their father or grandfather would have been doing during the war years, but as soon as I did that I put it out of my mind as totally irrelevant. I ceased being anti-German once I got to know another generation.'

Whenever a colleague asked him why he spoke German with such fluency, he responded: 'I was brought up in Auckland, New Zealand, by a German-born grandmother. She ran a bilingual household and insisted I learn German and speak it like a native German.'

The course of his life had taken him literally millions of (frequent flyer) miles from his boyhood in Germany so that, until well into his seventies, all he'd ever really known was a long string of successes.

As a young boy, and in my early adulthood, I felt uncomfortable about the privileges that had come from these successes, especially when I compared our lifestyle to that of most of my friends. We had housekeepers who made our beds and cooked our meals. We took holidays in Fiji and Perisher Valley. We had famous people for dinner. We had book-lined walls and original artworks, and a Blüthner grand piano dominating the living room, which overlooked Shell Cove in Neutral Bay. This was where my mother accompanied her friend Anna Tiessen, wife of the general manager of Lufthansa Airlines, as she trilled Schubert and Schumann lieder in the late afternoon on my return from school.

During those afternoons I would play a lot on my own. My favourite place to play was a giant camphor laurel outside my bedroom, where I had a makeshift cubby-house in the fork of the tree. From this private universe I fought a number of historic battles, all around me the smell of grapeshot, the whoosh of arrows, and the screams of anguish from the dead and dying.

I spent months of my childhood playing Cowboys and Indians from this well-camouflaged position—one afternoon shooting up an entire Indian reservation; the next day, having grown tired of another Cheyenne defeat, switching sides to Crazy Horse.

I don't think my parents or sister had any idea that I was fighting the Battle of the Little Bighorn from the tree next to my verandah, let alone contributing to General Custer's final ignominy. But what I realise now is that I took far greater delight in joining the Indians than being on the side of the cavalry. The Indians were the underdogs and I happened to like underdogs. Jews were underdogs, even though to my childish eyes they were often successful ones—people like my father who left our house each day in a beautiful tailored suit, driving a gleaming Jaguar.

I liked killing cowboys from my treehouse because it seemed to satisfy all these ill-defined impulses to go down fighting with the also-rans. I would be a better person for killing cowboys instead of Indians. Later in life I'd be a better boss's son if I was on the workers' side. And, naturally, I'd be a better Jew if I could one day make friends with the Arab.

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By the age of thirty-four my father had already worked in four countries—New Zealand, Australia, Canada and England. He'd arrived in New Zealand on 2 June 1939, after a six-week voyage aboard the P&O *Strathmore* with my grandfather and family and, thanks to Ernie's negotiations with the head of the SA in Sondershausen, they'd travelled first class with all their furniture, paintings and crystal.

From the moment my father saw the sparkling blue waters and wooded reserves of Auckland Harbour, he knew he'd reached his Arcadia. Beyond the curve of the bays was a country still emerging into nationhood, still reeling from the catastrophe of World War I, still coming to grips with those parts of its British heritage it wanted to retain.

After my father stepped off the *Strathmore*, he began to reinvent himself. He was Bernie Leser now, an adopted New Zealand son, not Bernd Leser, the German boy from Sondershausen. He would speak English, not German, and he would admit to no aspect of his Germanness. In New Zealand he would make friends rather than be rejected and shunned. He would learn to sail on Auckland Harbour instead of going on his own to the North Sea to overcome his childhood asthma. He would join the Zionist youth movement and go on Jewish camps instead of cowering in the corner of the playground.

At fifteen years and nine months my father left school and began his working life as a clothes cutter for an outfit called Stylish Clothing Company. It was there he learnt how to grade and mark the patterns on the cloth and how to use a piece of apparel machinery called the Hoffman press. But the job didn't suit him. He had no eye for it, and so he tried becoming a clothes designer. When that didn't work out either, he got a job as a time-and-motion man in a clothing factory. That had matched his temperament better—standing on the factory floor with a stopwatch, recording each operation, always searching for maximum efficiencies from his workers.

My father's real talent, though, proved to be in sales and marketing, and in the ten-year period before starting *Vogue Australia* he built an impressive résumé in women's fashion, swimwear and shoes, beginning with a five-year stint working for Hek Marler.

Sidney Ernest Marler (better known as Hek) was one of the great trans-Tasman business figures of his day, head of H.M. Marler, the leading importer of

shoes into Australia and New Zealand, and co-owner of the clothes and shoe company California Productions Limited.

At the age of twenty-two, eager to expand his horizons beyond New Zealand, my father arrived in Sydney from Auckland and began working in a clothing factory. Shortly afterwards, he was hired by John Rankin, the managing director of David Jones, to work in their shoe department. It was through Rankin that my father met Marler and, six months later, he was working for Marler in Bathurst, New South Wales, inside an old munitions factory that had been converted for the production of apparel and shoes. Marler appointed my father his 'productions investigation officer'.

Over the next five years, Hek Marler would prove one of the most important figures in my father's life, a man whose vision was nothing less than a global market in which ideas, people and products were unconstrained by geography. It was Marler who taught my father how to manage and give people confidence, how to correct and criticise without destroying self-esteem. Marler opened doors for my father and encouraged him to believe that anything was possible. He was, in fact, the first person to recognise my father's considerable talents and energy. He also taught my father how to drink properly—gin martinis before dinner, dry sherry with soup, white wine with fish, red wine with meat, followed by port with dessert.

At twenty-four my father was already travelling to the United States on behalf of California Productions (Australia and New Zealand), meeting the people who ran Cole of California, then the leading swimwear designers in the world. Cole of California had been founded in 1925 by actor Fred Cole, and the company's greatest asset at that time was the beautiful swimming star-turned-actress Esther Williams, who was to help revolutionise women's swimwear. ('It took the space

industry 10 years to put a man on the moon,' Fred Cole's designer daughter Anne Cole once said. 'It took the swimwear industry 100 years to move from the ankle to the crotch.'

Esther Williams turned my father's head during those early days, dancing with him one memorable night at the famous but now defunct Romanoff's restaurant in Beverly Hills, and later posing with him for a photograph in her swimsuit, a photograph that would forever take pride of place in our living room.

In 1952, Marler was keen to establish Horrockses Fashions under licence in Canada, Horrockses then being the oldest—and probably finest—manufacturer of cotton fabrics in England, their ready-to-wear dresses coveted not just by the general public, but by the royal family itself, including Her Majesty the Queen.

Not long after my father married my mother Barbara in Sydney, Hek Marler appointed my father vice-president of H.M. Marler (Canada) Ltd and Horrockses Fashions (Canada) Ltd, and charged him with setting up an office in Montreal from scratch. This was where he worked for the next four years, and where both my sister Deborah and I were born—me at the Jewish General Hospital in January 1956 during a blizzard. Seven days later I was circumcised, an act of such bloodcurdling precision that it caused my father to faint for the first and last time in his life.

Four years after moving to Canada, Bernie Leser was offered another job, this time in London, heading up the marketing division of Everglaze and Ban-Lon, a textile company operating on behalf of Joseph Bancroft & Sons in Wilmington, Delaware, which specialised in easy-to-wash-and-wear cotton fabrics.

By this time my father knew his way around clothes, fabric and shoes the way some men know their way around lathes and saws. He could tell you about how to

keep fabrics in fine condition. He could talk about bulking and crimping processes and how they should be applied to nylon filament. He could wax lyrical on the subject of wools, cashmeres and synthetic yarns and the non-porousness of nylons, particularly in hot climates.

We lived in London from 1956 to 1959 as my father travelled throughout England and Scotland marketing and promoting the trade names of Everglaze and Ban-Lon to weavers, spinners, knitters, garment manufacturers and retail stores. They were good years, and my parents lived well, renting homes in suburbs like Hampstead and Swiss Cottage, where a hooting owl used to terrify my sister and me from the tree outside our bedroom. Our parents were often away, leaving us in the care of nannies, and when they were home they were often entertaining, so much so that at the age of two I managed to discover the pleasures—and hazards—of a dry martini.

My father had learnt that the best way to make a jug of martini was to apply the formula of eight nips of gin to every one of vermouth and to stir it over ice in a martini shaker. One day, at a luncheon party for eight, he finished pouring a third round of martinis just as my mother called everyone to the table to eat. It was the second time she'd announced that lunch was ready, so in their haste the guests abandoned their drinks in the living room. That left six martinis essentially untouched.

I'm told it was the housekeeper who first saw a two-year-old boy lurching around the house and decided to tell my parents that their son might well be drunk. Apparently I slept for the next twenty-four hours, the only indication of my excesses being the dark circles under my eyes the following day.

In late 1958, two and a half years after arriving in London, my father received a phone call from Reggie Williams, the managing director of British Condé Nast Publications. Williams was a brusque Englishman with a short fuse, a former deputy military attaché to Washington during Lord Halifax's term as British foreign secretary. He wanted to see my father that day.

'I had to ask him three times what Condé Nast was,' my father told me, 'because I'd never heard of it.'

The two of them met for a ploughman's lunch at a pub near Wigmore Street and Williams explained that while Condé Nast already published three *Vogue* Australia supplements each year inside British *Vogue*, the company now wanted to start a standalone magazine for the Australian market. There was already a person selling advertising space on commission in Sydney, as well as an editorial representative, Rosemary Squire, looking at Australian fashion and commissioning photographs.

What they needed was someone to actually run the business and print the magazine in Australia, initially as a division of the British company, and then—if that proved successful—as a subsidiary of the American-owned parent company. 'Are you interested?' he asked my father.

'I said to Williams, "Look I know nothing about publishing. I've bought advertising and I know a lot about marketing and promotion and I think I can lead a team, but I have no knowledge or experience with anything to do with publishing, advertising and printing.'

'Well, you could learn that,' Williams replied.

That was in November. A few weeks later, Williams formally offered my father the job of launching Australian *Vogue*. He wanted him to begin in February the following year, but my father said this was too soon; he'd promised the Everglaze people that he would give them six months' notice before taking another job.

'Is that in writing?' Williams asked.

'No, Mr Williams, it isn't,' my father replied.

'Well, then, there is no contract,' Williams pointed out.

'But I gave my word,' my father countered.

'What if I said to you that I can't wait six months and that I've got two other candidates who I think could do the job as well as you and that you might be at risk of losing this?' Williams asked. 'What would you say to me?'

'Well, Mr Williams,' my father responded, 'I would be very unhappy, but I can't walk out on these people. They have been totally fair with me. I have no choice.'

Williams was trying it on. He wanted to gauge my father's sense of loyalty, and whether he was a man who would cave under pressure. Luckily he was not, and luckily again, Everglaze agreed to let him go three and a half months early. They'd known for some time of his desire to return to Australia and they were happy to find a compromise.

In early 1959, my father flew to New York to undergo six weeks' training at Condé Nast's Madison Avenue headquarters while my mother, sister and I made the voyage to Australia on the Dutch liner *Wilhelm Ruys*, sailing through the Suez Canal to Colombo, Singapore and on to Sydney. This would become my first Proustian

memory: the taste of Carnation milk and chocolate sprinkles on white bread, and the smell of lavender in the toilets.

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By the time my father started Australian *Vogue* on 1 March 1959, he was a young man with a fierce determination to establish *Vogue* as the premier glossy magazine in the country, particularly in the face of all the naysayers—of which there were many—who said it couldn't be done, that the country didn't need a magazine like *Vogue*; that, indeed, the magazine was too snooty and highbrow for an egalitarian society like Australia's.

My father wanted to prove them wrong. 'I truly believed that Condé Nast had a future in Australia and that Australia would become increasingly sophisticated,' he told me. 'I had a vision of everything to do with quality in Australia growing as Australians travelled more and became more exposed to Europe. I felt that, together with immigration, this was going to deepen and broaden our culture, especially as a new generation came through.'

To realise his vision my father had to educate advertisers on why they needed to place their business with an upmarket magazine like *Vogue* instead of mass-market publications like the *Australian Women's Weekly*, *Woman's Day* or *New Idea*. For that to happen he had to entertain them. Often. Which was why there were always so many martini-soaked lunches and dinners for friends and colleagues from the fashion, cosmetics and advertising world held in our family home.

As a child I remember Rosemary Cooper, the first editor of Australian *Vogue*, coming to dinner wearing her gloves and trademark pillbox hat, and Sheila Scotter, her successor, assuming a regular spot at our table. Sheila Scotter was always so

impeccably spoken and immaculately groomed, so handsome in her well-tailored black and white outfits and the silver hair, which had earned her the moniker ‘Silver Duchess’, that she would put a knot in my stomach just by looking at me.

Scotter was in many ways an early version of Anna Wintour, the despotic style queen of American *Vogue* fame. A daughter of the Raj, born in Calcutta and educated in England, she’d arrived in Australia in 1949 and begun working as a high fashion buyer for the Myer Emporium before taking a job at Everglaze, the same company my father had worked for in London.

Brilliant, provocative and tyrannical, she had cultivated powerful friends in Australia, like Harold Holt, Frank Packer and Reg Ansett, and she was absolutely fearless in promoting both them and herself.

My father appointed her in 1962 as the third editor of Australian *Vogue*—Joan Chesney Frost had been the second editor for a brief period—and for the first five years their relationship flourished, along with rising circulation figures and advertising revenue. By 1967, however, the year of *Vogue Living*’s launch, the figures for *Vogue* were starting to tell a different story, along with the story that Sheila Scotter was telling about herself.

‘She was increasingly taking the view that *she* was *Vogue*,’ my father explained, ‘and that my role was a relatively unimportant one. And she began playing politics by going to my masters in New York.

‘I had a very simple philosophy—then and now—in business: if you run a business, you really have to satisfy three parties. First, you have to satisfy your customers, which, in our case, were our readers and advertisers. Second, you have

to satisfy your shareholders, your owners. And third, you have to satisfy—and have a good relationship with—your colleagues and staff.

'Sheila was totally ego-driven. She loved building editorial features around her friends. She loved putting her friends in the social pages. And she was a tremendous bully who ran the magazine through fear. She was good to people who were sycophants, who told her what she wanted to hear, but she was very bad with people who opposed her point of view. And they usually didn't last.'

By 1970 my father and Scotter were barely on speaking terms and the following year he finally called her to his office and told her he was letting her go.

'You can't do that,' she said. 'You have no authority to fire me.'

'I believe I have,' my father replied, 'but I think in your own interests it would be better for you to resign.'

'I will *never* resign,' she retorted. 'You are going to have to fire me.'

'May I suggest,' my father said, 'that you take legal advice before you go down that road.'

She did, and from none other than Tony Larkins, Frank Packer's legal adviser. The following morning at 7 am she called my father. 'I've changed my mind,' she said. 'I'm resigning.'

Sheila Scotter never forgave my father for dismissing her, and I became aware of this at a *Vogue* party in 1999, twenty-eight years later, when I overheard her talking loudly to a group of people while my father was making a speech to mark forty years of Australian *Vogue*. 'He never gives anyone credit for his success,' she complained. 'It's always about him.'

All my life I'd heard my father speak warmly of the people who'd shown faith in him, who'd opened the right doors for him, who'd brought their creative talents to bear on the work he'd done. He knew his limitations and he credited a legion of people with making him look better, Sheila Scotter among them.

When Scotter kept criticising him as he spoke, I had a brain snap. She had no idea who I was because it had been nearly three decades since we'd last seen each other. I'd changed far more than she had. 'You are way out of line, Sheila Scotter,' I said to her. 'I think it's time to shut up.'

She looked at me with horror. 'I don't even know who you are,' she replied incredulously.

'I'm David Leser,' I responded, 'and you are way out of line.'

She was suitably mortified, as were those around us.

Curiously, a year earlier, Scotter's book, *Sheila Scotter: Snaps, Secrets and Stories From My Life*, had been published by Random House and she had invited my father to the launch. Just as curiously, my father had accepted the invitation—until he read a story by Daphne Guinness in the *Sydney Morning Herald* outlining some of Scotter's claims, including that it was *her*, not *him*, who had made *Vogue* and that he never acknowledged what others had done for him throughout his career.

My father had fired off a letter to Scotter:

*In more than thirty-eight years with Condé Nast, I have always held to the conviction that our editors are our most important assets. When we satisfy the market, i.e. readers and advertisers—and in that order—the editors deserve the lion's share of the credit.*

*When, on the other hand, our magazines become weaker and diminish, the editors have to take responsibility as well. I suggest you ask your immediate successors, Eve [Harman] or June McCallum, or for that matter Beatrix Miller in London or Anna Wintour and Tina Brown in New York whether or not they felt supported by me over the last thirty years plus.*

*You have so much talent, so much ability, that it is precisely this attitude which has caused your career to come adrift over and over again. And that's sad. As far as your respect for me is concerned, I frankly could not care less.*

*I do want to say, however, that I still think that appointing you as editor was one of the best decisions I ever made but so, equally, was my unhappy decision to let you go. I fully understand that even after all these years you still bear me ill will because of that. To be asked to leave can never be anything other than hurtful to the person at the receiving end. But I assure you, it wasn't easy for me either. In fact, I hated it.*

My father then took aim at what he regarded as the most egregious claim in Daphne Guinness's story—that Scotter saw Condé Nast as being run by a 'Jewish mafia':

*To link the word mafia with Condé Nast is about as ridiculous, untruthful, unrealistic and unfair as it could be, and the way the term is used by you could almost be considered defamatory. But don't worry. I have no intention of pursuing this through legal channels. Life is too short.*

*More importantly, to link mafia with the word Jewish conveys beyond a shadow of doubt that you are an anti-Semite. As it happens, even though my Jewish*

*friends would hardly consider me a good Jew, certainly not a very observing one, I am rather proud of my historical and cultural heritage. I could have done a lot worse.*

*In using this term you insult not only me but indeed every Jew, whether known to you or not, including Daniel Salem [then head of international operations for Condé Nast], Alex Liberman [former editorial director of Condé Nast] and, indeed, our [half-Jewish] friend Bails [Sidney Baillieu Myer, son of the founder of the Myer Emporium].*

*There is, of course, another way of looking at it, and that is that the term Jewish mafia used in such a derogatory fashion by you is really a terrible indictment on you, and underlines your miserable prejudices and intolerance.*

*I find your reference offensive and unacceptable and that is why I shall not attend the Random House function, nor any other function at any time which is arranged for the purpose of honouring you.*

And yet my father changed his mind and went to the launch—and was received warmly by Scotter—because, as he told me years later, he was still grateful for all she'd done for *Vogue*. Despite everything she'd said about him—and he'd said about her—he still wanted to pay his respects.

Not so Sir Frank Packer's widow, Lady (Florence) Packer. Although Lady Packer had ended up launching Scotter's book, she did so without having read it first. It was only after the launch that she found out that her late husband had been one of Scotter's regular breakfast companions. Lady Packer never spoke to Scotter again.

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Another regular at our house during those early *Vogue* days was Norma Mary Marshall, my father's assistant, who would later go on to become the magazine's advertising manager. I was besotted with Norma Mary. To me, she had the hair of an angel and the most wonderful cleavage I'd ever seen. I was five years old when I first invited her into my bed. 'Would you like to get in and have a cuddle?' I suggested when she'd come to my room to kiss me goodnight. 'That's a sweet offer,' she replied. 'Perhaps not tonight.'

Seven years later Veruschka von Lehndorff, the German-born supermodel, arrived for supper with her Italian photographer boyfriend, Franco Rubartelli, and again it was love at first sight. She was the most attractive, elusive creature I'd ever seen. I knew nothing, of course, about how she'd come to be a supermodel; nothing about her Prussian count father who'd been executed in Germany in 1944 for his role in the plot to kill Hitler; nothing about her mother, who'd been imprisoned by the Gestapo, nor anything about the fact that Verushka herself, along with her sister, had been interned in a POW camp for the remainder of the war.

All I could see through the Turkish-bath lens of my pubescent fantasies was a future linked to this six-foot-tall Aryan beauty. Would she leave Rubartelli for me? If she did, what would I do then? And how would we dance, given she was more than six feet tall and I wasn't quite five foot four?

On another occasion, I found myself sitting opposite Dame Margot Fonteyn. England's finest prima ballerina had come to dinner at our home with her wheelchair-bound husband, the former Panamanian politician and ambassador Roberto Arias. I was thirteen and, once again, hopelessly unaware of the company I was in. This ignorance extended, naturally, to ballet, but also to politics and how it

was that Mr Arias had come to be paralysed from the waist down. Perhaps my parents had told me that he'd been suspected of organising a coup against the government of Panama, and that five years earlier he'd been shot in the back by a former political ally. I doubt it.

What I know now, though, is that at the time of the assassination attempt, Dame Margot had been planning to leave him but, instead, had chosen to devote her life to tending his needs, forcing herself to dance until she was sixty—and bankrupting herself in order to pay for his medical bills. And this despite all the grief he'd apparently caused her with his long absences and serial adultery.

Again, I was aware of none of this while watching Dame Margot spoon-feed the paraplegic Roberto Arias the herrings my mother had prepared for them. All I sensed was that the world, my world, was full of interesting people—in particular interesting, glamorous women—and that I was imbibing something important about them from my parents.

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I was also imbibing something about being Jewish—this inchoate sense of being special, marked, chosen, of having a different language, a different set of dates and rituals and customs, of belonging to a dark history and contested geography that few others in my own shallow-rooted country could claim to possess, unless, of course, they were the indigenous Australians that we never thought much about.

As a young Jewish boy growing up in Australia, I sometimes felt as though I'd entered the picnic grounds through the wrong gate. It felt like I'd come out of the pine forest, covered in damp and nettles, while everyone else had been leaning against the palm trees, gazing out at the Pacific breakers. Often I had this feeling of

immense gloom and foreboding. Gloom over what had happened in the Shoah, of things so calamitous they could never be accounted for, let alone properly explained. And foreboding—a deep, abiding sense that something awful might still occur if we weren't careful, if we didn't stick together, if we didn't remain forever strong. And if we didn't refrain from taking unnecessary risks.

*No, David, you cannot have a bicycle. We should survive the Holocaust so that you can kill yourself on a bicycle?*

Perhaps my mother, Barbara, never actually uttered these words, but it seemed as though she was always thinking them. The air I breathed was charged with anxiety and, at times, a feeling of unutterable sadness. We'd come from somewhere else, somewhere European but also pre-European; God-granted but God-forsaken; civilised but brutish and wretched. Everyone who was Jewish had suffered and knew other Jews who had also suffered and there were a few million of us who had suffered—although millions less than there used to be—and you couldn't possibly be part of this community, this people, this nation, this universe of suffering, unless you took all this to heart and made it your own, even if you didn't understand it. It was like having bars of misery playing through your bones, with their own distinct notes and lamentations.

When I was in synagogue as a young boy I would look at all the men and their sons and wonder whether they, too, were carrying the same enormous weight of sadness. I felt sure they were because, otherwise, why was there so much keening, so much mournful prayer, so much hand-wringing going on behind these big old green iron gates of the Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street, Sydney?

Of course there was conviviality and warm embrace too, small talk and gossip and introduction to sons and nephews and ‘How’s your business doing?’. There was all of that, but it was washed through with sombre tones of awe and repentance and a deep remembrance of terrible things. The sun would be blazing outside, and the rest of the country would be heading to the beach, preparing picnics, placing bets, putting out the washing, donning their cricket whites, embracing the Australian way of life, yet here we were—the chosen ones—indoors, genuflecting to an invisible, omnipresent God with His clear moral laws, listening to our rabbi chanting holy words in a language that one day I would have to chant in myself. And even though I understood not a word of it, I knew from an early age what the stories were about: all the years of wandering and persecution and arrest and forced conversion and upturned gravestones and pogroms and exile and the profound sense of struggle and hopelessness and loneliness that had gripped us, this tribe of mine. Stories of Creation—Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, the Tower of Babel. Stories of the Exodus. Stories of Moses and the Burning Bush and the laws he brought down from Mount Sinai. Stories of parting waters and the Promised Land. Stories of prophets, priests and kings. Stories of expulsion and return. Stories of wisdom and courage. And how blessed was I to belong to such a people, with all this suffering but with all its civility and humanity and enlightenment, too, and its dreams of restoration and redemption.

There was only one redemption in all of this for me, however, and it lay not in any afterlife but immediately above me in the upstairs gallery of the synagogue. Every Saturday morning all the dark-eyed daughters of the faith would be sitting with their mothers and grandmothers, looking down on us boys with blushing cheeks

and furtive gazes, and it was then that I, twelve years old and fast approaching puberty, would thank the Almighty Lord for having saved my family from the ovens, for having allowed me to be born so that I might share one day soon—God willing, perhaps even at Marty Rosenberg's party next Saturday night—the ambrosial delights of Margot or Virginia or Donna or Karen or Debbie or Vivian or Marilyn or Lesley or Sandy or either of the two Susies. These synagogue maidens were the girls of my generation from good Jewish families who would one day marry the boys from good Jewish families, but who, at this deliciously uncertain point in our history—the late sixties to be precise—were still very much up for grabs for a kiss or fondle or something higher, lower and deeper.

'Did you go upstairs outside with her?' a friend asked me at a party one night, giving me a conspiratorial wink. I was thirteen at the time.

'Sure,' I said, not knowing what he meant, especially given that the house was only single storey and there were no balconies.

'What was it like?' he said.

'Great,' I replied.

'What about downstairs inside? Did you go there?'

'Look, we've been down there most of the night,' I said, revealing my astonishing ignorance of the codes of teenage petting. It was then he explained that 'upstairs outside' was the term for fondling the breast from outside the clothes, and that 'downstairs inside' ... Well, you'd have to have been Joshua entering the Land of Canaan to have spent even a minute in that place, and I was not him, although I most definitely had aspirations in that direction.

On the weekends I would spend most of my Sundays in the Eastern Suburbs with other Jewish kids, vying for the favour of one of these girls, hoping to see what was underneath their bikinis once we'd managed to get them from Bondi Beach to somewhere less public. We would congregate on the stairs outside the main pavilion at Bondi—a place dubbed Little Jerusalem because of the number of (mostly on heat) Jewish kids who hung out there.

Afterwards, if you were lucky, you would find yourself in Lesley's treehouse or Marilyn's father's toolshed or, as I was on one occasion, hiding in Karen's wardrobe when her parents came home. I'd been on the bed with Karen and was just finding my way across her Land of Milk and Honey when her father, the president of the Great Synagogue, called out to see if his daughter was home. She was very much at home, but I was a long way from mine, so I hid in her wardrobe for two hours, submerged in her shoes and dresses, trying not to breathe, praying to a merciful God not to be discovered, and for my tumescent excitement to subside.

Most of those girls were in the Great Synagogue on that day in February 1969 when I was bar mitzvahed, a quivering wreck of a boy-man trying to sing in a foreign language with a voice still cracking into the downward registers of adulthood.

I remember that day for a number of reasons, chief among them being the terror of singing in front of a packed synagogue, and the panic that overwhelmed me when I suddenly lost my place halfway through the service. The portion of the Torah that I was chanting was purportedly the longest one of the year, some fifty-one verses from the Book of Judges, detailing the heroics of the prophetess Deborah. In the middle of one of these verses, I looked up and saw a friend pulling faces at me. When I looked back down at the page I had absolutely no idea where I was, or what I

was supposed to be singing. I froze in front of a full congregation, until my teacher, Rabbi Israel Porush, the man responsible for guiding and moulding the reconstruction of Judaism in Australia following World War II, walked over to me, singing the words I'd forgotten, and pointing to the correct place on the page.

I received thirteen Seiko watches that day and delivered a speech to more than 100 people in which I thanked the rabbi and my family for everything they'd ever done for me. Then the music started up and I danced, first with my mother, and then with my tall Aunty Rozzie, who crushed me to her bosom as we waltzed around the dining room.

That was the last time I saw my grandfather, Kurt Leser. He was sitting at the lunch table in his silk gabardine suit, still an elegant figure at seventy-two but stooped and grey and terribly withdrawn. I learnt later that he'd been so ill he nearly hadn't made the trip from New Zealand. He died four months later.

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My father was such a somebody, a *big somebody*, that as a child I felt I had to be a somebody too. Otherwise I would just end up as an anybody or, worse still, the son of a somebody who himself had turned out to be a nobody. It wasn't a conscious thought but it was there, ticking away in the background, creating its own irresistible storyline, fuelling me with a large ambition.

I was desperate to win my father's approval and I can see now that it's one of the main reasons I became a journalist. I wanted to stand up to him, to counter his arguments, to mess a little with the protective suit that he wore. My father held strong opinions on a lot of things: on subjects like history and politics, and also on people of importance, people of 'excellence'. And he argued about all these things

with such conviction that you needed good ideas and choice words to match him, otherwise you could be ground to dust.

Sometimes I felt my mother had been ground to that place a long time before, not just by my father, but also by her mother Hansey, grandmother Ettie and adopted Aunty Poppie—three Jewish empresses with a propensity to scold and dictate to a little Jewish girl the tenets of proper behaviour. That was always a theme in my family—proper behaviour—and it came down from both sides of the line. The combination of my father’s German-ness—with all its strictures around punctuality, courtesy and dress code—together with the style dictates of *Vogue*, meant that proper behaviour assumed a supreme role in our moral universe. I think my mother suffered under the weight of this although, God knows, her own lineage boasted matriarchs as stubborn and judgemental as Old Testament High Priestesses. (Ettie, my Latvian great-grandmother, for example, never approved of my German grandfather Kurt and stepmother Ernie because they didn’t speak Yiddish.) And even though my mother’s parents were highly cultured, she had, in many ways, the sensibilities of a country girl, raised in Bowral in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, where she loved nothing better than to collect pine cones and pick fruit, play piano, listen to music—her beloved Chopin and Beethoven—talk to friends, read by the fire.

Her father had died when she was four, leaving her to a grieving, self-absorbed mother and a brilliant, caustic stepfather, Sam Simblist QC, who married my grandmother six years later. Sam Simblist knew the law better than most, but his heart was hidden behind his decrees and sarcasms and any father-love he might have had was reserved for his natural daughter, Diane, my mother’s half-sister.

After growing up without a father, and under the tyranny of her mother, grandmother and aunt's severe strictures, my mother was beset by deep insecurities. When she married my father in 1952, their life together suddenly catapulted her into a glamorous, international world for which she was not entirely prepared. But my father gave my mother confidence. He made her believe in herself, up to a point. He took her on a magic-carpet ride around the world, introduced her to people and places she might never have been exposed to otherwise. 'I couldn't have achieved what I achieved if it hadn't been for Mum,' he told me once. 'Asking her to marry me was probably the most important decision I ever made.'

As my father lost his foothold later in life, my mother would come to dominate him in ways she never had before. 'Have you taken your pills, Bern? Why not? I put them out for you. And don't tell me you're having another drink? For goodness' sake, can't you see what it's doing to you? You'll just have to stop or I'll hide the bottle. Now do you want some dinner? No? You can't just exist on liverwurst and bread.'

Such a shifting of the earth's axis. When I was younger it was always my father who dominated the room. I'm sure that's why my sister, Deborah, developed such a lifelong antipathy to political and business discussions, and why my brother Daniel often felt awkward at the dinner table. Our father often held court on Condé Nast-related issues (as well as Churchill, Hitler and Roosevelt) and there was nowhere to go except to become sullen and withdrawn (my brother), feign ignorance or change the subject (my mother and sister) or respond with verbal volleys of one's own—as I eventually did.

The way to engage with my father, I realised, was through the power of words. My father had obviously grown up speaking German but had learnt to speak English as a teenager without a trace of the Saxon man on his tongue. Perhaps that's why words were so crucial to him—a love of language to be sure, a vehicle for conveying ideas certainly, but also, in a very real sense, a means of concealing who he was, concealing his origins. He spoke as though he'd never set foot in Germany. In fact, he spoke not unlike his hero, Winston Churchill.

At fourteen my father had set about wiping his native land from the map of his mind, snuffing out the language, erasing the memories, severing all links to the country that had rejected him. My grandfather had done the same, although his act of reinvention was never as successful or urgent. He'd been broken by two world wars and his injuries, both physical and emotional, persisted throughout his life. Over a lifetime my father became a phenomenal success story, but also one of the proudest and most protected men I have ever known; protected, I suspect, even from himself, although as I write that I think: *who am I to judge?*

Throughout my teenage years and young adulthood I railed against many of my father's values. They were, in large part, the values of the ruling class and, in my father's case, values all too often worn with a sense of self-importance I found discomforting. How else to say this? My father, for all his progressive political views on many things, for all his love of family and friends, for all his charm, courtesy and goodness of heart, was an unashamed snob and elitist. This often made him more remote to me than he might otherwise have been.

As my father's ascent within Condé Nast gathered pace throughout the late seventies, eighties and early nineties, so too did many of the trappings of wealth and

power. I recoiled from the chauffeurs and upper-class gentlemen's clubs in England after he went there in 1976 to run Condé Nast's British operations. I chafed at the black-tie dinners and *Vogue* party chatter that passed for conversation. I shuddered over the obsession with how things looked, rather than how things were or might be. I didn't like my father's stiff punctuality, which he no doubt inherited from his German forebears. I didn't like his obsession with etiquette and manners, with what was considered 'the right way of doing things'.

My father was formal and proper and buttoned up and so, naturally, inevitably, I rebelled. In my late teens and early twenties I became a hippie and grew my hair long. I wore tattered jeans, smoked dope, played guitar and listened to protest songs, most of which were aimed squarely at the heart of men like my father. I adopted socialist views and argued relentlessly with him about the role of unions, the greatness of Whitlam (now there was an argument to be had, after Whitlam's dismissal), the shrill conservatism of Murdoch (and what a hypocrite I would soon turn out to be), the desirability of women without makeup (and how that cocked a snook at the *Vogue* cover girl!) ... all these things forever simmering away in the background, creating what I sometimes felt was low-lying mutual indignation. Mutual indignation tempered, of course, with great love.

As a student at Sydney Grammar School I was often placed on detention, or caned for impertinence, mostly for challenging my teachers. After I finished school, I came to relish this challenging of authority, and anyone in a position of power seemed to me like fair game. What a benevolent sign from the universe it would turn out to be, then, that I would eventually get paid to be impertinent, to ask questions others feared asking, to catch people off guard, to size them up, pull them

down, turn them around and show them to the world in new, often less flattering colours. My father might have been content dog paddling in the shallows of the fashion world, but I was never happier than diving down into the murky depths of the human condition.

Any good psychologist—or blind prophet—could have told you I was making ready to star in my own little Sophoclean play, one that would see me try to kill (metaphorically speaking) my father through the printed word. I would prove and best him at my chosen profession. I would target people in power so as to test the theory of clay feet, his and everyone else's. I would profile people who my father and mother actually knew and liked, and then write devastating critiques of them. I would expose people's puffed-up pretensions and examine their contradictions. I would lay bare their falsehoods, boosting myself by bringing others down. I would be sent on choice assignments, win accolades for my fearless reporting and sometimes lyrical prose, and I would inhabit my job every bit as much as my father had, without recognising any of this for a second.

What I wilfully chose to ignore during these callow years, however, was that my father was actually the standard-bearer for all that I would come to regard as good and noble in journalism and politics. He admired Rupert Murdoch's extraordinary success but he abhorred the way he used his newspapers and editors to advance his own ideological agendas. He believed fervently in the separation of church and state, and the right of editors and journalists to report and interpret the news as they saw fit.

He raised eyebrows among his Liberal Party friends by casting his ballot for Whitlam in 1972. He voted for Hawke three times, Keating once, Beazley once, Rudd

once, Gillard once, while never resiling from his historical support for Menzies, Holt, Gorton, Fraser and Howard, nor his admiration for Margaret Thatcher and his undying reverence for Winston Churchill.

His creed was generosity of spirit and largeness of heart. He believed that those who held to a strong ideology often severed themselves from their own humanity. He recoiled from the zealous and dogmatic. His library was filled with books on history, politics, philosophy, biography and the constant, relentless probings of the Fourth Estate.

At heart, he was a Jewish libertarian and later, during the late eighties and early nineties in New York, together with Si Newhouse and Alex Liberman, the Russian-born painter, sculptor and editorial director of Condé Nast, my father would be part of the Jewish triumvirate—*not mafia!*—that ran America's richest media empire, and employed the best editors, publishers, art directors, photographers and writers in the world.

He would regularly send me articles from the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and the *Spectator*, marking out great passages of writing, pointing to the spirited position of the writers, extolling the virtues of a free press and—by implication—planting in me the strong self-belief that I might even belong in their company. ‘See attached,’ he would write. ‘This is what you’re capable of. With all my love, Your Dad.’

It has taken me the better part of fifty years to come to terms with all this, to wrestle with all these conflicting emotions, and to understand just how and why words would become so important to me as a way of dealing with them. Words, if used well, could crack the armour, challenge the construct, command the attention of people—particularly my father, whose attention span could sometimes be

alarmingly short. They could wrestle with paradoxes, prise open the heart, create some soft meadow through which two people might wander, particularly a father and son. They could also fill the unbearable silences into which we would fall when discussions weren't being conducted on agreeable terms.

Looking back now, this is why in 1979, after having spent a year writing woeful advertisements for car upholstery, after having wandered around India, Nepal and the Greek islands, after having done three weeks of commerce at university before changing to an arts degree, I became a reporter on Rupert Murdoch's Sydney *Daily Telegraph*.

## **'THIS IS NOT THE FUCKING JERUSALEM POST'**

Jobs on newspapers don't just fall out of the sky. Long before the decline of the printed word on paper and the rise of social media, a position on a newspaper was hard to get, so hard you needed to have grafted your way up from the inside, first as a copyboy, then as a young cadet, to secure your place as a journalist. Or, alternatively, you needed to have been given a parachute which could miraculously drop you into a newsroom without any of the requisite skills.

That was the way I landed in 1979, with a graceless thump, right in the middle of one of the toughest, most competitive newspaper offices in Australia. 'What can you write about?' the *Telegraph*'s chief of staff, Cliff Neville, asked me when we were introduced on my first morning as a young journalist.

I'd just completed my arts degree in English literature and Middle Eastern politics so I said, 'Well, I think I know a fair bit about the Arab–Israeli conflict and patron–client relations in the Middle East.'

Before I give you Cliff Neville's devastating riposte, let me just provide the back story ...

Two years earlier, at the age of twenty-one, I landed in Israel for the first time, a few weeks before the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat crossed the Suez Canal on his historic mission of peace.

I spent some time on a kibbutz so when I arrived in Tel Aviv on 19 November 1977 I hadn't read a newspaper or heard a radio report for a month. I was shocked by the preternatural calm that had fallen over Israel's largest city. No tramp of feet,

no swelling crowds, no car horns; just a suspended hush, as if war or plague had suddenly been declared and a people ordered indoors.

The nation was, in fact, indoors, as I discovered when I walked into a café on Dizengoff Street. A crowd had gathered around a television set and there on the screen was Anwar El Sadat, walking down the stairs of his presidential plane and being greeted by the Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, President Ephraim Katzir and a twenty-one-gun salute. Anwar Sadat—the same man who, four years earlier, had nearly defeated the Jewish state in a surprise attack by Egyptian forces on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

'What's happening?' I asked the man next to me.

'You don't know?' he replied, looking at me with a mixture of condescension and pity. 'Sadat is here.'

'In Israel?'

'Yes, in Israel. Where have you been?'

'On a kibbutz.'

'Well, he's here. Look. At Ben Gurion Airport.'

'What's he here for?'

'You don't know?'

'No.'

'He's here to talk to us, to talk to the Jews. He wants to kill us, now he wants to talk. So let's talk.'

Sadat had declared his intention ten days earlier of visiting Jerusalem and it had sparked demonstrations across the globe, not to mention angry denunciations

throughout the Arab world, which still refused to recognise Israel's right to exist. The Soviet bloc was also incensed, countries like Hungary, East Germany, Yugoslavia and Albania warning they would attack Egypt if it attempted to make peace with the Jewish state.

Sadat addressed the Israeli parliament (November 20, 1977), the Knesset, the next morning in Arabic, in a speech broadcast to hundreds of millions of people. I watched in disbelief and awe:

*Ladies and gentlemen, there are moments in the lives of nations and people where it is incumbent upon those known for their wisdom and clarity of vision to survey the problem, with all its complexities and vain memories, in a bold drive towards new horizons.*

*Those who, like us, are shouldering the same responsibilities entrusted to us are the first who should have the courage to make determining decisions that are consonant with the magnitude of the circumstances. We must all rise above all obsolete theories of superiority, and the most important thing is to never forget that infallibility is the prerogative of God alone.*

*If I said that I wanted to avert from all the Arab people the horrors of shocking and destructive wars, I must sincerely declare before you that I have the same feelings and bear the same responsibility towards all and every man on earth, and certainly towards the Israeli people.*

*Any life that is lost is a human life, be it that of an Arab or Israeli. A wife who becomes a widow is a human entitled to a happy family life, whether she be an Arab or an Israeli.*

*Innocent children who are deprived of the care and compassion of their parents are ours. They are ours, be they living on Arab or Israeli land ...*

*Allow me to address my call from this rostrum to the people of Israel. I pledge myself with true and sincere words to every man, woman and child in Israel. I tell them from the Egyptian people who bless this sacred mission of peace everywhere ...*

*Introduce to the entire world the image of the new man in this area so that he might set an example for the man of our age, the man of peace everywhere. Ring the bells for your sons. Tell them that those wars were the last wars and the end of sorrows. Tell them we are entering upon a new beginning, a new life, a love of life, prosperity, freedom and peace.*

*You, sorrowing mother, widowed wife, you, the son who lost a brother or a father, all the victims of war, fill the air and space with the recitals of peace, fill bosoms and hearts with the aspirations of peace ...*

Anwar Sadat said many other things that historic day, words that to my impressionable ears seemed holy, and were to inform my thinking on the Middle East forever. He talked about how a people's happiness could never be built on the misery of others. He said he was now welcoming the Jews to live among the Arabs in security and safety, but that no durable peace could ever be reached without a just solution to the Palestinian problem. He admitted that, yes, the Arabs had refused to meet or exchange even the most cursory greetings with Israelis for thirty years but that now, as the leader of the Arab world, he was extending the olive branch to Israel in a partnership based on peace and justice.

He said the psychological wall of separation that had been built by Israel over the years—a separation based on its legitimate fears and its assumed superiority over Arab forces—had been decisively destroyed by Egypt's stunning advances during the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

He said no peace could ever be achieved by the occupation of Arab land and that if Israelis were to ever know true peace, they would need, once and for all, to withdraw from the Occupied Territories and Arab (East) Jerusalem. By doing so, Israel would have all its security concerns guaranteed by the two Superpowers, guarantees which would be accepted by the Arab world.

'You should clearly understand the lesson of confrontation between you and us,' Sadat continued.

*Expansion does not pay. To speak frankly, our land does not yield itself to bargaining, it is not even open to argument. We cannot accept any attempt to take away or cede one inch of it, nor can we accept the principle of debating or bargaining over it. I sincerely tell you also that before us today lies the appropriate chance for peace. If we are really serious in our endeavour for peace, it is a chance that may never come again. It is a chance that if lost or wasted, the resulting slaughter would bear the curse of humanity and of history.*

I have been contemplating those words for more than thirty-five years now, but back in 1979, on my first day at the *Daily Telegraph*, my pretensions of Middle Eastern expertise were lost on Cliff Neville. In fact, what followed was a dreadful silence and then Neville's withering reply: 'Mate, this is the *Daily Telegraph*, not the fucking *Jerusalem Post*.'

'Right.' I blushed. 'Well, I've also studied Proust, Flaubert and Thomas Mann.'

'Is that right?' he said, hissing like a bearded cobra. 'I guess that's going to come in very handy when you're doing the weather reports and police rounds, isn't it? Tell me, mate, do you know how to type yet? What's your shorthand like?'

'I don't do shorthand,' I replied. 'And my typing's not so great either.'

Cliff Neville looked at me as if I'd just pissed on his shoes. I was there against his own best instincts. He was under instructions from the editor, Adrian Begg, to give me a desk and something to do. Adrian Begg was under instructions from management to do the same. The instructions had come from none other than Rupert Murdoch.

Although not yet the leviathan figure he would one day become, even in 1979 Rupert Murdoch was not a figure to be messed with. In 1953 he'd taken charge of News Ltd following the death of his father, Sir Keith Murdoch, and through the 1950s and early '60s had begun to expand his empire to include television licences. In 1964 he'd become a major player on the Australian political scene by launching the *Australian*, the first national newspaper in the country. Four years later he'd created waves in England by purchasing the racy but now defunct, scandal-spreading and scandal-plagued *News of the World*. It was the first of many audacious acquisitions that would earn him the sobriquet of the 'Dirty Digger'. During the 1970s his ambitions began to soar. He bought the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* newspapers in Sydney, then a publishing company in San Antonio, Texas, followed by the *New York Post* and then the New York Magazine Company, publisher of *New York* and *Village Voice*.

By the time I was finishing off my last university essays on Marcel Proust and the Arab–Israeli Six-Day War, he was well on the way to becoming the newspaper prince of the world. And here's the thing: he owed my father a favour.

In 1977, shortly after taking over as managing director of British Condé Nast, my father had given Murdoch's daughter, Prudence MacLeod, a job on British *Vogue*. It was a lifeline, a confidence boost, to Murdoch's eldest child – at that time an unhappy but talented woman - and my father thought it only fair and reasonable to ask Murdoch to return the favour. And so the *Daily Telegraph* was to become my baptism by the banks of the River Jordan, except there was not a sprinkler of holy water or a spruiker of good Christian virtue within sight. There was, however, Norm Lipson.

Norm Lipson was a short, tough, angry working-class Jew with an extraordinary propensity to pick fights—with his colleagues, his interviewees and, it seemed, with anyone who happened to glance at him the wrong way. Up until that point, I'd never met a person like him.

On my first day in the newsroom, he walked up to my desk with a menacing glint in his eyes. 'How ya goin'?' Norm Lipson.'

'Good thanks,' I replied.

'You're the new fourth-year cadet, are you?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Where've you come from?'

'Macquarie University.'

'Yeah? What were you doing there?'

'Bachelor of Arts degree—English and Middle Eastern politics.'

'Yeah, well, you know, mate ... a good Arab's a dead Arab.'

I should have let that go through to the keeper but for some reason I decided to take issue with my new colleague.

'I don't know, Norm,' I said. 'Once you get to understand Arab society, Arab culture, the Arab street, it's a lot more complex than that. If you look at the history of colonialism in the region ...' I prattled on like this for a few minutes until I noticed that Norm's pupils had narrowed into black pinheads and his body had become taut.

'Mate, you're a fucking gig, do you know that?' (I didn't actually know that because I wasn't quite sure what a gig was, although I found out later it was something close to a bloody fool.) 'Do you want to step outside while we sort this one out?'

'Look, not really, Norm. This is my first day here and I don't really want to fight you.'

'Well, you're a fucking idiot, aren't you?'

'I don't know, Norm. Maybe I am. Maybe all Arabs are fucked. I just didn't think they were as fucked as you claim, but maybe you're on to something.'

'Alright,' he said. 'But think about what I've told you—because you're a Jew yourself, is that right? You're a fucking Red Sea pedestrian like me?'

A Red Sea pedestrian? 'Yes, Norm, I am.'

'Well, we've got to stick together, right?'

'Yes, we do, Norm.'

As I was to discover later, Norm was also a very good reporter and a man I would cautiously grow to like. He had contacts going all the way from the top of the political hierarchy to the bottom of the criminal pile—police commissioners, police

informers, underworld figures, petty spivs, smooth-talking lawyers—and he could wheedle, tease, cajole and threaten information out of just about all of them, and then return to the newsroom to bash out a 600-word page-one story in thirty minutes flat.

In late December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and I was assigned to accompany Norm to the Soviet consulate in Sydney, where members of the local Afghan community had gathered in protest. By the time we arrived in the early afternoon, the demonstration was already heating up.

I had begun to construct an opening paragraph in my mind—‘A crowd of 300 anti-Soviet demonstrators gathered yesterday outside Sydney’s Soviet consulate ...’—when suddenly a wild scuffle erupted around me.

‘Don’t you fucking push me, you fucking Arab gig,’ I heard Norm yelling at a group of demonstrators, while unleashing a volley of punches.

It didn’t matter that Afghans weren’t Arabs—never had been, never would be; what mattered was that here we were in the middle of a brawl with them. Even then I knew enough about reporting to know this wasn’t meant to happen.

‘Norm, it’s okay, mate. They didn’t mean to push you.’

‘You fucking gig,’ he said through a sea of arms. ‘Don’t you come into this country and start pushing me around, you fucking gig.’

The scuffle lasted a couple of minutes. Norm was pulled off the demonstrators. The police stepped in. We went back to reporting on the fury being directed at Moscow’s representatives in Sydney by a group of Afghan Australians.

That was my introduction to news reporting.

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It took me a while to learn where to pitch my tepee on this wild reservation. In those first few days I was shown to a desk next to veteran journalist Ronnie Gibson, a woman with an impressive cleavage and an apparent fondness for pig-shooting. She used to bang away at her typewriter with a cigarette dangling from her mouth and a smoke-cured squint in her eyes. She was not into small talk or niceties, at least not with me.

One day she saw me at my desk writing a story in longhand, and asked what I was doing. I told her I was writing a story. ‘Well, why don’t you learn to use a fucking typewriter?’ she said.

So I did. I went to the Judy Suiter secretarial college in the evenings where, along with twenty young women, I discovered the practical pleasures of touch-typing and shorthand. Within twelve months I could type faster than any other reporter on the paper and I could take down 100 words a minute in Mercury shorthand, a bastardised version of shorthand that was to become my own secret script, illegible to anyone but myself.

These were handy skills for a newsroom, although there were times I would have preferred competency in martial arts. Not long after starting at the *Telegraph* another senior reporter, Dorian Wild, made his feelings known to me. I’d arrived at my desk to find all my files, notebooks and diaries scattered on the floor and Wild sitting in my chair.

‘Excuse me, Dorian,’ I said politely. ‘I think you’ll find this is my desk.’

‘Fuck off, Leser,’ he said. ‘Find another desk.’

My response was not the kind you'd expect from someone who'd only been in the newsroom a few months. 'Listen here, you imperious prick,' I replied. 'Give me my desk back.'

Wild's response was elementally Australian. He stood up, pushed his chair back and decked me.

Dorian Wild doesn't know this but he taught me one of my first big lessons in journalism, and it didn't involve aiming a left hook at his ugly, pink, jutting jaw. It was more to do with ethics than pugilistics.

A few months after I started on the paper, Wild replaced Cliff Neville as chief of staff and, in that capacity, sent me to cover an event for the United Nations Media Peace Awards. The main award was being given to the then head of the Australian trade union movement, Bob Hawke—the beer-swilling Rhodes Scholar who four years later would become Australia's Labor prime minister—for a series of Boyer lectures he'd delivered earlier in the year on the theme of non-violent resolution of conflict. My job was to interview him afterwards.

That's exactly what I did, except what I failed to do was far more important. Bob Hawke wasn't the only one receiving a peace prize that day. Monica Joyce was accepting one on behalf of her husband, ABC journalist Tony Joyce, a brave and eloquent man who'd been killed earlier in the year while covering civil unrest in Zambia.

During the ceremony, Tony and Monica's five-year-old son Daniel was asked to come to the stage to collect his father's award, and I noticed that he was wearing the same black and gold Sydney Grammar uniform that I'd worn for twelve years. This was our point of contact, and following the ceremony, after my interview with

Bob Hawke, I went up to little Daniel Joyce and asked him how he liked the school and what he thought of the school principal, Mr Billings. ‘Good,’ he answered in his sweet, high-pitched voice.

‘Well, congratulations on your daddy’s award,’ I said, then returned to the newsroom to write my story on Hawke.

At 6 pm, after I’d filed my unremarkable piece, Dorian Wild came up to me and said, ‘So what did the kid say?’

‘What do you mean?’ I replied.

‘What did the kid say when you asked him how he felt when his old man was killed?’

‘I didn’t ask him that,’ I said.

‘Well, call him up,’ Wild growled, ‘and ask him what it was like when his old man was killed in Africa.’

‘Dorian, I can’t do that.’

‘Why not?’ he said.

‘Because it’s wrong. He’s just a kid. He’s only five years old.’

‘Listen, Leser, if you don’t do it you’re out of a job,’ came the brisk retort.

For the next two hours I pretended to make phone calls to little Daniel Joyce. I called friends and asked them if they’d mind staying on the line so that it looked like I was having a conversation.

The deadline came and went. I never spoke to Daniel Joyce but the next day’s paper ran a page-three photo and a story about Daniel Joyce with my by-line attached. The headline read: Brave Daniel, and it included information gleaned from I don’t know where, certainly not from me and certainly not from ‘Brave Daniel’.

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One of my next assignments was in a place called Thirlmere, a small town south-west of Sydney where an eighteen-year-old woman had vanished from her home. Her near-naked and battered body had been found ten days later in an orchard thirty kilometres away.

I'd gone to the town with a senior reporter to try to gauge the reaction of the community to her murder. We did that by sitting in the pub and talking to locals; me earnestly taking notes as my colleague downed one schooner after another.

When we returned to the newsroom later that evening my drunken co-worker began tapping out the opening paragraph: 'Thirlmere was a town of tears and anger last night as residents mourned the death of Carol Ann Astley.'

After nine more scintillating paragraphs written at breakneck speed he then turned to me and asked, 'So what did the bloke you were speaking to in the pub say?'

I began rifling through my notes, but before I had a chance to select the most appropriate quotes my colleague was already putting down the thoughts of one distressed resident: 'I can't believe this has happened in this town ...'

'Hey, you can't say that,' I protested.

'Who says I can't?' he said.

'How can you have her saying that? She didn't say it.'

'Yeah, but that's what she meant to say. Don't be a fuckwit, mate. We're just helping her to be more succinct.'

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I worked on the *Daily Telegraph* for three years. During that time I learnt how to cover parliament, court cases, fires, murders, industrial disputes and general news.

Once I even got to write a feature story about the Middle East. It was on the death of the King of Saudi Arabia and the question marks hanging over his successor. The by-line above the story was by David Le Ser, probably an unconscious indicator of what the *Daily Telegraph* thought of my Middle Eastern posturings.

For a year I was the paper's religion and ethnic affairs reporter, the highlight of which was sitting through a private screening of Bob Guccione's controversial new movie, *Caligula*, with Fred Nile, the deeply conservative clergyman-turned-politician. The two of us had never met before, but we sat together for 156 excruciating minutes in a small theatre in George Street, watching a mad emperor's various acts of violence and sexual depravity on the screen.

I had only one wish that day—for Fred Nile to fulminate and thunder sufficiently that I would have myself a front-page scoop. For that to happen *Caligula* needed to be as graphic a depiction of imperial Rome's decadence as was possible. Thankfully, the filmmakers didn't disappoint. Caligula was the wild-eyed lunatic history had led us to believe, and he had a magnificent sexual appetite to match. There he was, fornicating with the virgin bride on the night of her marriage before fist-fucking the groom and then having the groom's penis chopped off for good measure. What a great way to meet the Reverend Fred Nile. I glanced at him numerous times during the movie as he shifted in his seat, muttering, 'Oh my God.' At one point he turned to me, completely ashen, and asked for a strong cup of tea. 'This is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life,' he said.

The next day's paper walked off the stands.

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I think one of my greatest achievements during those first years in journalism was not surviving the Afghan demonstration with Norm Lipson, nor picking myself off the floor after Dorian Wild had thumped me, nor even securing that front-page scoop on *Caligula* with the Reverend Fred Nile. It was avoiding being arrested by the New South Wales Police.

Neville Wran was premier at the time and in 1980, as a new member of the press gallery, I was invited to his end-of-year Christmas party at Parliament House in Sydney—a rowdy, jocular affair at which journalists and politicians swapped mostly apocryphal stories under the influence of too much alcohol. Halfway through the night, veteran radio reporter Sean Flannery asked me and a female colleague if we'd like to smoke a joint with him outside.

'It's fabulous stuff,' he assured us. 'Pure Lebanese blonde.'

I'd never been stoned in Parliament House before. This seemed like a good time.

After rolling up on his news bureau desk the three of us walked down two flights of stairs to a landing outside the parliament building, overlooking Macquarie Street. No sooner had we each taken a drag than a police car suddenly came towards us with its spotlight glaring and a voice booming through the megaphone. 'This is the police. Don't move.'

Natural prudence should have told us to stamp out the joint, pretend we'd been smoking a cigarette, then introduce ourselves as members of the press gallery enjoying a break from the premier's party. But prudence deserted us that evening as Sean Flannery yelled, 'Quick, run for it!'

I'd been covering state parliament for less than two months. I'd been a reporter for no more than a year. I had no political friends and certainly no police sources who would come to my aid. I was a panic-stricken cadet reporter way out of my depth. And as Sean Flannery bounded up the stairs two at a time, yelling, 'Fuuuuuck!' I was in hot pursuit—as were two police officers.

The police caught our female friend on the stairs but Sean and I made it to the second floor, where the media bureaus were positioned, one after the other down either side of the corridor. Sean reached the end of the corridor first and dived under a couch in the ABC newsroom. I kept running.

'Stop!' ordered the police officer. 'Stop or I'll shoot!'

DID HE SAY 'STOP OR I'LL SHOOT'?!

There was no way on God's earth I was stopping, so I dashed past the ABC office, rounded the corner, jumped an entire set of stairs, then a second set, to find myself one floor below in the tranquil confines of the Hansard reporters' room. I began leafing through the transcripts of that day's parliamentary proceedings as casually as I could, hoping desperately to look like a young man diligently doing his job. The fact that I was flushed scarlet and gasping for breath didn't exactly help my cause.

The tap on my right shoulder came a few seconds later.

'Come with me,' the officer said.

'What do you mean?' I replied. (It was more like What [pant] do [pant pant] you [pant] mean [pant pant]?)

'You were just outside on a landing with two other people.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I said.

'We've already got your friend in the back of our car so you'd better come with us.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I repeated.

'Don't bullshit me, mate. I saw you on the landing outside and you were the one I was chasing.'

'Listen, Officer, I'm just trying to get a bit of work done before I go back to the premier's Christmas party.' Pant. Pant pant. Pant.

'Come with me,' he replied.

I was under arrest. In a few hours I would lose my job and probably find myself a news item in the next day's opposition newspaper. I could see the headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: Murdoch reporter arrested in State Parliament. At least it wasn't going to be: Murdoch cadet shot by police!

As I was being marched back up the stairs and down the corridor to the waiting police car, Sean Flannery emerged from his hiding place with a look of casual insouciance on his face, his eyes bloodshot.

'Good evening, Officer,' he said. 'Sean Flannery, 2UE.' Sean had been a police reporter for probably twenty years before being sent to Macquarie Street to cover state politics. He knew most of the state's senior police officers and they all knew him, or had heard of him.

'Sean, how's it going?' the policeman replied.

'Not bad, not bad. What are you up to?'

The police officer pointed at me. 'This bloke was downstairs on the landing with two other people. We saw them smoking something. One of them's in the car already.'

'Oh, you mean Jane?' Sean said. 'I wouldn't worry about her. She's with me.'

And then Sean whispered conspiratorially to the officer, 'Look, the thing is, she's married to ... and she's having it on with ... and her husband doesn't know.'

He had just named the well-known press secretary to a well-known federal Labor politician and an even better-known NSW Labor figure. 'Know what I mean?' Nod nod wink wink.

'Bloody hell, Sean, I don't need this kind of bullshit on Christmas,' the officer said, believing every word of Flannery's concoction. Then the two of them were slapping each other on the back with blokey delight and the officer next to me was yelling out to his colleague to let our friend (whose name wasn't Jane) out of the police car. 'Hey, Bill ... this is Sean Flannery. Remember him? 2UE. Yeah. Listen, mate, she's fine to go.'

And then: 'Have a great night, Sean.'

'Yeah, you too. Merry Christmas.'

Suddenly we were free. Stoned and free. Just like at Woodstock.

Sean Flannery died in November 2011 after a long battle with cancer, and I'm sorry I never took the opportunity to thank him for having saved my sick and sorry arse.

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In my third year on the *Daily Telegraph* I was invited to become the newspaper's Melbourne correspondent. I was twenty-six years old and I'd graduated from novice university cadet journalist and fugitive reporter to someone who could be trusted to run a one-man bureau in Australia's second largest city. It wasn't New York but it felt

like a promotion, even though the paper's interest in Melbourne often reflected the smug indifference of a larger city for a smaller one.

It was in Melbourne that I encountered my first dead body. A helicopter carrying a television news crew had crashed in a paddock on the outskirts of the CBD and I'd raced from the office to find four bodies charred and, in some cases, still smoking amid the wreckage. The pilot had apparently stumbled seventy metres with his clothes on fire before collapsing. I never found out whether he survived or not. It was a story with a twenty-four-hour life cycle and all I knew from that day on was that it would take a lot to get me inside a helicopter.

In 1982 Melbourne felt more like a large provincial town than Australia's second metropolis. I was the only reporter covering the city for the *Telegraph* but I shared a newsroom with nine others—eight men and one woman—all of whom worked for the three other Murdoch publications, the *Australian*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. It was pretty obvious from the first day that a number of them didn't like me.

'Here he comes,' one of them smirked as I walked into that sad little newsroom at the Warsaw end of La Trobe Street one morning. 'Here comes the Christ killer. Let's pin him up on the wall and do to him what he did to our Saviour.'

There was general guffawing as I stood there looking at them, shocked and red-faced. For years afterwards I replayed that moment, chastising myself for being just another Jewish lamb to the slaughter, but this journalist was a good five inches taller than me and I knew he was probably less the anti-Semite and more the alcohol-fuelled intellectual with a large but sozzled brain. He had a vast knowledge

of history, politics and religion and he loved to spice his comments with mordant wit and religious metaphor.

Twenty years later I saw him at the Byron Bay Blues Festival and I pointed him out to my wife, Merran, as the man who'd once called me a Christ killer. Merran confronted him and he exploded, denying he'd ever said such a thing and accusing me of defamation. I think B.B. King was on stage at the time, belting out 'Sweet Little Angel' though, in the spirit of some of my earliest lessons as a reporter, I might be making that up.

## AND THE BAND PLAYED ON

At the end of 1972, as Gough Whitlam was being sworn in as Labor prime minister, my father was putting together a consortium to buy the rights to publish *Vogue* and *Vogue Living* in Australia under license from the American parent company.

These two men who, strangely enough, would become good acquaintances later in life, would become the two towering figures of my young teenage life—one a lofty idealist determined to put an end to the born-to-rule assumptions of the Tories; the other a publishing idealist determined to establish a new journal of style, taste and high society in his adopted land—possibly the most un-Australian thing a man could do in a former penal colony.

Thirteen years after Australian *Vogue* had been established, S.I. Newhouse agreed to my father's buy-out proposal and the new company—Bernard Leser Publications Pty Ltd—was launched in typically *Vogue* style.

On the last evening of Condé Nast Publications' existence in Australia, my father and his colleagues held a wake for the company with black candles, caviar and champagne. The following morning my father arrived at the office of Bernard Leser Publications to find a large white satin ribbon and bow draped over the front door and a breakfast of champagne and smoked salmon prepared by his adoring staff.

'He was so lovely we used to call him Father Bear,' Norma Mary Marshall, the woman I'd tried to bed as a five-year-old, said many years later. 'We were like a family.'

So much so that each Friday at noon Norma Mary and my father and the rest of the female-dominated management team would shut themselves off in the

beauty department and drink Bloody Marys mixed by the beauty editor, Joanne Fuller. It was a far cry from the metropolitan newsroom where journalists would often head to the pub for a liquid lunch; veteran reporter Jim Oram distinguishing himself one day by pissing into his wine carafe in the middle of a meal.

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For those first years in journalism I was never able to entirely vanquish the charge of nepotism. That was understandable then, and seems even more understandable now. Australians—with their felon origins, their bushranger folklore, their hell-raising, working-class impulses—weren’t inclined to look favourably on acts of patronage, especially when bestowed on the son of a silvertail magazine publisher.

Never mind that the newsroom, like the suburban dentist surgery, family business or cattle property, was often the training ground for the sons and daughters, nephews and nieces, distant cousins and bastard children of the reporter, dentist or farmer. That wasn’t how Australians saw themselves. We saw ourselves as the classless, egalitarian society of our romantic myth-making. We were all as good, if not better, than our despised masters.

That being said, there was nothing remotely classless or egalitarian about *Australian Vogue*. This Bible of fashion, this arbiter of all things chic and trendy, had, from its inception in 1959, been the glossy dream space in which Australian women could first enter the worlds of Paris, London, Milan and New York high society. Better still they could dress themselves just as the women of these glittering cities did.

This was the high society load I carried into the newsroom and it added considerably to the fear roiling around inside me—fear of not knowing my way

around a city and of not having developed sufficient contacts to inform my stories. Fear of getting scooped by the opposition. Fear of being underprepared for an interview. Fear of not asking the right questions. Fear of being overwhelmed by the demands of filing up to five stories a day. Fear of being too dimwitted, credulous or slow. And, of course, fear of being seen just as my father's son and dismissed accordingly.

This fear took up permanent occupancy inside my nervous system, but it was given a good run for its money by its more devious—and desirous—bastard child: ambition.

I had no real awareness of this at the time, but I can see now that I was a young man with the burning desire to prove I was more than just the privileged, first-born son of a Jewish glossy magazine king. The burning desire to prove that Rupert Murdoch had not been wrong to order one of his editors to give me a job. The burning desire to prove I could actually write.

I was completely driven by this need to make my mark, and in the spring of 1982, two possible ways of doing so presented themselves. One was to go to Kampala, the war-torn capital of Uganda, as Reuters' correspondent; the other was to go to New Orleans, the gastronomical and musical epicentre of the American Deep South.

Three years after starting at the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney I was offered the job in Uganda by an Australian reporter looking for someone to replace him in his one-man Kampala bureau. I was seriously tempted. It had been three years since Idi Amin, the wife-eating butcher and president-for-life, had been ousted by his political nemesis, Milton Obote, and from the outside it seemed things could only improve.

Idi Amin was in Saudi Arabia and, more importantly, no one on the streets of Kampala had any idea my father was the man who'd started Australian *Vogue*. This was reason enough, I figured, to get lost in Winston Churchill's 'Pearl of Africa'.

It would have been a disastrous move. The day after I was due to begin my new posting, Milton Obote expelled every foreign journalist from the country. The bloodletting commenced then with renewed vigour, away from the prying eyes of the press.

New Orleans was a far more civilised alternative. It was the House of the Rising Sun, the Big Easy and, unlike Kampala, it had restaurants and bars and pecan pies and Bourbon Street, where a young man could get lost, wasted, or both. It had Mardi Gras and the world-renowned Jazz and Heritage Festival and a French Quarter full of dilapidated charm fronting onto Huck Finn's Mississippi River, where giant rats lurked and where the night always seemed to promise a hint of romance or magic.

Bob Dylan once described New Orleans as a 'very long poem', and it was. In the French Quarter nearly every doorway opened onto secret gardens of tropical lushness and in the Garden District you could take the Streetcar Named Desire along wide oak-lined boulevards of French, Greek and Italianate mansions belonging to old Southern families. There were jazz clubs and above-ground tombs ('cities of the dead') and venerable music institutions like Preservation Hall, where legends such as Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton and Sweet Emma Barrett had once performed.

The air was steamy and dreamy and the food was out of this world—oysters the size of clenched fists, hot steaming bowls of gumbo, and Cajun restaurants like Antoine's and Galatoire's where, in the case of the latter, patrons were forced to queue in the street for a table, even if they happened to be the president of France.

'I'm sorry, sir,' the maitre d' had apparently told President Charles de Gaulle's aide-de-camp when he'd tried to book a table during a state visit to the Deep South. 'We don't take reservations for anyone. Monsieur de Gaulle will have to queue like everybody else.'

I liked the sound of a place that told presidents to wait in line for their shrimp remoulade. It appealed to the anti-authoritarian spirit that this son of Australian *Vogue* was desperate to cultivate.

I loved American popular culture—its music, writing, films, art and architecture; I just hated its foreign policy—in Panama, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, Ecuador, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Middle East ... the list was endless.

And here, now, was my father, by this time managing director of British Condé Nast, the Newhouse family-owned group that published *Vogue*, *Tatler* and *Brides* in the United Kingdom, asking me if I wanted to try out on one of the Newhouse newspapers in America.

Yes, I did, and no, I didn't. I didn't want to have to live up to my father's name all over again—and yet I knew I'd be crazy to let the opportunity slide. I also conned myself into believing that if someone at an American newspaper saw what I'd written in Sydney and Melbourne, I'd be given a trial period. Opportunism and self-delusion, therefore, took precedence over pride.

'Well, sure,' I said, 'but why would they give me a job?'  
'They'd only give you a job after a suitable trial period on the paper,' my father replied. 'And then only if you're good enough.'

'What if I'm not good enough?' I asked.

'Then you won't last,' he said.

'Are you able to get me an introduction?'

'Of course.'

'Where do they have newspapers?'

'All over the country,' he said.

'Like where?'

'There are papers in Michigan, Massachusetts and Mississippi.'

'Is that all?'

'I think they've got papers in Alabama and certainly in New Jersey and New York.'

'Anywhere else?'

'They've also got a paper in New Orleans.'

'New Orleans?'

'Yes.'

New Orleans wasn't Newark, New Jersey, and it definitely wasn't Kalamazoo, Michigan, or Pascagoula, Mississippi.

'That's it,' I said. 'That's the place I want to go.'

It was as easy as that.

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I arrived in New Orleans on a scorching afternoon in September 1982 to be met at the airport by the seventy-six-year-old billionaire chief executive of the only newspaper in town, the *Times-Picayune*.

I'd flown into a city I had scant knowledge of, with journalistic credentials limited to three years in a country no one cared about, coins in my pocket I couldn't

count—owing to the fact I didn't yet know the difference between a dime and a nickel—and only one name in my contact book: Norman Newhouse.

Norman Newhouse was the youngest brother of the late Samuel I. Newhouse, founder of the Advance Publications Empire which owned and operated Condé Nast Publications. He was also uncle to Si and Donald Newhouse, Samuel's two sons who, upon their father's death in 1979, had acquired the riches of Solomon through magazines like *Vogue*, *House and Garden*, *Glamour*, *Brides*, *Mademoiselle* and *GQ*, the Random House book publishing group (in 1980), a large cable television operation and twenty-six newspapers throughout the country.

At the time of my arrival in the US, Condé Nast Publications was the biggest family-owned media empire in the English-speaking world, and Norman Newhouse was responsible for many of the papers in the South: the *Hunstville Times*, *Birmingham News* and *Mobile Press-Register* in Alabama; the *Mississippi Press* in Pascagoula, Mississippi; and, of course, the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, Louisiana. Despite his shyness and humility, Norman Newhouse was arguably the most powerful individual in the city and he was now standing beyond the customs lounge, all five foot five inches of him, wearing a blue seersucker suit and bow tie, with a sign bearing my name.

'Hello, Mr Newhouse,' I said, moving towards him. 'I'm David Leser.'

'Davey?' he replied with a broad grin and a decisive thrust of the hand.  
'Davey Lessa?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'Welcome to N'Awlns,' he drawled.

'Thank you, sir. It's great to be here.'

'The car's just over here,' he said, leading me out of the terminal and into the blazing Delta heat.

'Is this your first time in N'Awlns?'

'Yes, sir. First time in America.'

'Well, I'll be.'

Norman Newhouse was five years old when he'd started selling newspapers on New Jersey street corners in 1911. He'd become a reporter on the *Staten Island Advance* after his brother bought the paper in 1922, and had gone on to become managing editor before transferring in 1937 to the *Long Island Press*. During World War II he'd been seconded to the United States Army Air Corps as a writer and then sent to North Africa to take up the position of executive officer for the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency. He'd been one of the instrumental figures in setting up that first historic meeting between Winston Churchill and Yugoslavia's Marshal Tito in Naples in 1944. Now he was barrelling down the highway in his powder-blue Buick, perched on a couple of cushions so he could see better over the steering wheel, having invited me to stay in his two-storey, five-bedroom mansion on Arabella Street with his wife Alice and son Jonathan.

'Mr Newhouse, I'd like to thank you for giving me this trial period on your newspaper,' I said after a few minutes of companionable silence.

'Son,' he said, turning towards me with an impish grin, 'we *baleev* in nepotism around here.'

*Did he just say what I thought he said?*

'Excuse me, sir?'

'I said we believe in nepotism around here, boy. Now look over there, that's the new Superdome—finished ten years ago—cost us a fortune; home to the Saints. Biggest domed structure in the world. And over here is ...'

Norman Newhouse had just said in plain language what I'd known all along, but refused to admit to myself or anyone else. I was in this city because of patronage, not merit, even though I'd sent to the newspaper some—I see now in retrospect—fairly undistinguished samples of my work from Australia: page-one helicopter stories; feature articles on feral cats and Middle Eastern potentates. Who was I kidding? As if he or anyone else would have bothered to read them! This three-month trial period was a piece of high farce. I would have to be brain dead not to keep the job for the one-year period of my visa. As I was to learn, you didn't necessarily have to be good at your job to stay employed by the *Times-Picayune*, the name of which was derived from an old Spanish doubloon, but also meant trifling or irrelevant.

Podine Schoenberger, the medical/science reporter, had joined the paper some time around 1932 and fifty-odd years later, at the age of eighty-something, was still there, as capable of understanding the latest developments in quantum theory as I was of passing myself off as a Cajun fisherman.

Podine had poor circulation and was forever swathed in woollen suits and hats, even during the height of summer. She had no life outside the paper and had to be eased out of her job gently, around the time the AIDS virus came to town. It would have been way too much for her.

Mabel Simmons had also been there for the long haul. When I arrived she was in her nineties, a typist with big breasts and a predilection for sweetheart

necklines. One morning she walked into the newsroom with a band-aid stuck to the exposed part of her bosom. She told us she'd been burnt while frying bacon in the nude. Even though she was surrounded by reporters, not one of us asked her for more information.

One day, a few months later, Mabel was discovered fast asleep at her computer terminal. A compositor downstairs had noticed a mile of zeds running through the computer system and contacted the newsroom. Mabel had drifted off with the last letter of the alphabet pinned under her left elbow:

And yet there were some first-class reporters on the paper as well, many of them Ivy League graduates bursting with energy, desperate to break new stories, expose corruption and put themselves—and their newspaper—on the map.

Dean Baquet was one of them. Son of a black New Orleans restaurateur, he was, at the time we met, a softly-spoken, chain-smoking sleuth who, through dint of shining intelligence and sheer hard work, had managed to ascend from his humble origins to a job at the *Picayune*, then, in later years, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In 1988 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his investigations into Chicago City Hall corruption, before going on to become national editor of the *New York Times*. In 2005 he became the first African American to become managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, only to be sacked two years later for refusing to institute budget cuts that would have ripped the heart out of the newsroom. That was just like Dean. Back in the early 1980s I'd never met a man so deeply wedded to the craft and calling of journalism. Nothing was ever going to stop

him from becoming one of America's finest reporters and—at the time of writing—he is managing editor of the *New York Times*, the first African American to be appointed to that position too.

Another gun scribe was Rick Raber, graduate of Princeton University, who had left an internship on the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to take up a reporting position on New Orleans' only newspaper. Rick was a dead ringer for Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars* and, with his Pacific-blue eyes and knock-'em-dead smile, he could melt a Southern belle from thirty paces. He was also a gifted wordsmith, the envy of every other writer on the newspaper, myself included.

When he wasn't at work Rick was usually in his French Quarter apartment with the phone off the hook, reading F. Scott Fitzgerald or Raymond Carver, and periodically taking aim at the giant cockroaches dive-bombing from the kitchen walls. Although sociable and often riotously funny, he was more at home with his books and writing. It was Rick who first introduced me to William Faulkner, Walker Percy and Robert Penn Warren, and who would later share with me his deep insights into the other giants of the American literary project—Ernest Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, John Updike, John Cheever, Saul Bellow, Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote.

On Sunday afternoons I would often find him in a café near the Mississippi, thumbing through a dog-eared copy of *All the King's Horses* or *The Great Gatsby*, taking the cure from all those men of letters who'd come before him. Tennessee Williams once had an apartment around the corner from where we both lived; William Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* in his garret just off Bourbon Street. To me, Rick Raber, in all his youthful, preppy, self-effacing ways, was the real deal.

John Pope was another who left a lasting impression, not just because he could write about almost anything with wit and elegance, but because he was fond of wearing bow ties and performing calisthenics at his desk while yodelling the words ‘lawdy, lawdy, lawdy’. He was a singular character and the one who welcomed me most warmly into the newsroom—the main reason, I suspect, being that he was the only one on staff who had ever ventured as far as Australia. John Pope taught me a lot about the difference between American and Australian reporting in those days and it was no surprise twenty-three years later to learn that he’d been part of the team of *Picayune* journalists who’d won two Pulitzer Prizes for their reporting on Hurricane Katrina.

In September 1982, the very idea that the newsroom I had just entered would one day be evacuated, or that floodwaters would submerge eighty per cent of the entire city, was simply too fanciful for words. At that time I had my own terror to deal with and it had nothing to do with burst levees and Category 3 hurricanes. It was simply making myself understood in the canteen when I turned up to order my lunch.

‘I’d like a chicken and salad sandwich to take away,’ I said to the woman behind the counter.

‘I’m sorry, honey, I don’t get ya.’

‘A chicken and salad sandwich to take away, please,’ I said again.

‘I’m sorry, dawlin, still don’t get ya,’ she said.

‘I’d Like A Sandwich And I’d Like You To Put Chicken, Lettuce And Tomato On It,’ I said slowly, with emphasis on the Tomato. ‘And I’d Like To Take It Away From Here.’

'Ya mean cheekn dresta go?' she replied.

'Yes, I think that's what I mean.'

'Ya not from here, are ya, honey?' she said, and with that the line of journalists behind me erupted in laughter.

No, I wasn't from here. I was from way beyond the bayou. I was an impostor with a strange accent, a shock of curly black hair, decked out in yellow pants, black boots and a black leather tie—*what in God's name was I thinking?*—and living my own version of *Five Easy Pieces*, except that unlike Jack Nicholson I didn't trash the canteen; I just slunk away red-faced back to the newsroom to consider my predicament.

As far as I could tell, the questions my colleagues were asking themselves over their grits and eggs and fried chicken and dressed-up sandwiches to go were: Who is this guy? How did he get here? Can he write? And why is he wearing yellow pants and black cowboy boots?

The first two questions were easy enough to answer. I was the son of the man who headed British Condé Nast and I'd got here, just as Norman Newhouse had described that first morning, because of blatant nepotism.

The third question was the crucial one. I might have covered various beats for the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* and taken the odd Christian fundamentalist politician to films glorifying wild promiscuity, but whether that qualified me to cover a city renowned the world over for its music and food and wild hybrid culture remained to be seen.

In truth I didn't think I could do it. I thought I had made a gigantic mistake and it would be better to leave now and not subject myself, or the family name, to

the ignominy that would surely follow. I could return to Israel, where I'd spent a few months prior to my arrival in New Orleans trying to briefly cover the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. And so one night, a few weeks after landing in New Orleans, I phoned my father in London to tell him of my decision.

'Dad, I don't think I can stay here,' I said. 'Everybody thinks I'm a member of the Newhouse family. Do you know what Norman Newhouse said to me in the car on the way from the airport? He said, "We believe in nepotism around here." Can you imagine what that feels like? Dad, it's just impossible. I feel like a freak every time I walk into the newsroom. People ask me how I got the job, which newspaper I've come from. They laugh at my accent. I want to leave.'

My father's silences could be excruciating. I could picture him there in his Chelsea apartment, mouth set hard against the dewy light of the Thames, Scotch in hand, a barge hooting from behind the willows, staring at the pile carpet.

'David, all I've done is open the door for you. If you're no good you won't last.' That was his constant refrain. Open doors lead to golden opportunities. Doors slam shut again if opportunities are squandered.

'But, Dad, there are thousands of college graduates who could have got this job if I hadn't taken it. You said I was on a three-month trial period. There isn't a trial period. They've given me the job because I'm your son.'

Long silence. And then: 'Is it only when I'm dead you'll feel okay about being my son?'

The suggestion was appalling but probably nothing less than I deserved. I'd let my father float the New Orleans option knowing full well the Newhouse family would never have given me the time of day without his connections. I'd allowed

myself to believe I would be assessed on merit and given an appropriate trial period, even though I knew it didn't operate that way. Once you were in, you were family.

All I could say was: 'Oh Jesus, Dad, don't be like that. I love and respect you. You just don't understand what it's like being your son sometimes. There's a lot to live up to.'

There was no response on the end of the line.

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I stayed with the Newhouse family for a week before moving into my own apartment on St Philip Street in the famed French Quarter. It was an old slave quarter with a tropical garden and giant rats, which crawled from the banks of the Mississippi River three blocks away.

This was the year AIDS arrived and the panic was growing by the day—particularly in the gay community, where young men were beginning to report rare lung infections, malignancies of the skin and impaired immune systems.

For some reason, I was made the newspaper's first AIDS reporter, so that within a few months of arriving I was cruising the bars and bathhouses of the French Quarter trying to find out what on earth was happening.

'You wanna suck the head and squeeze the tip with me,' my muscular, moist-lipped landlord had asked me one night—and, no, he hadn't been referring to the local technique for eating crawfish.

I declined because I didn't have even the slightest homosexual leanings, and because I'd just been given some insight into the easy virtue of New Orleans gay life.

'You won't believe me if I tell you,' the doctor from Southern Baptist Hospital had replied when I'd asked him to describe the sexual behaviour of the first AIDS victim he'd seen (at this time it was still called Gay Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

'Try me,' I said.

'Well, if I told you he was having one hundred and twenty sexual encounters a week, what would you say to that?'

'I'd say that's impossible.'

'Well, that was what he was doing.'

'That's nearly eighteen a day! How did he manage that?'

'He was on the receiving end.'

This took a few seconds to digest.

'Eighteen a day? Where was all this happening?'

'In the bathhouses and saunas.'

In those early days of homophobic-inspired AIDS hysteria I was floored—and yes, a little disgusted too—by this level of carnality. I was also a little envious of all that defiant, transgressive sexual celebration. I figured that most heterosexual men would have gladly done the same thing had they (a) found enough women willing to go to bed with them, (b) had the stamina—and the control—to satisfy that many partners in one day, (c) been able to get away with it and (d) had the time.

I eventually decided that, rather than this being exclusively gay behaviour, it was actually more about men in general and their perennial desire to shag anything that moved.

I could relate. Sex had been on my mind for a long, long time.

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Ever since I'd been rejected by my father's assistant at *Vogue* magazine at the age of five, I'd been determined to press on in search of divine convergence. My early home life had looked at times like a tear sheet from *Vogue*, with an assembly line of beautiful women regularly visiting for lunch, dinner or supper parties. At the age of five or six, I'd roll down the garden path so I could see under the dresses of the departing female guests.

It was too fantastic for words: garter belts, sheer stockings, soft pale thighs, panties—black and red and sheer—the hint of pubic hair. Enough to feed a boy's lurid imagination for years.

My younger brother, Daniel, would do a similar thing when he was a little boy. Between the ages of three and six he would often walk into my parents' dinner parties, scratching his willy and claiming an inability to sleep. He would then proceed to plant himself under the dining table and, for the next hour or two, amuse himself by taking off all the women's shoes while, presumably, sizing up their ankles and thighs. No one seemed to mind.

Our father adored women and the feeling was entirely reciprocated. As managing director of *Vogue* he not only employed and promoted them, he also cultivated their rich talents—despite what Sheila Scotter had to say about him. He listened to them. Advised them. Guided and motivated them. Earned their trust and respect. Became godfather to some of their children. Befriended them in ways that would leave their indelible mark not just on him, but on my brother and myself.

Women like the Hungarian-born clothes empress, Maria Finlay; former Miss Victoria and Qantas Ambassador, Pat Tudor; top fashion designer, Norma Tullo; famed artist, Judy Cassab; iconic fashion designer, Carla Zampatti; high-profile PR

consultant, Glen Marie Frost; British journalist and *Vogue* historian, Erica Goatly; Eve Harman, Sheila Scotter's replacement as editor of *Vogue*; her successor, Northern Irish-born June McCallum; her successor again, Pittsburgh-born beauty Nancy Pilcher. And lesser known – but equally talented - women like Carol Ashley-Wilson, Ann Coventry and Kate Smith. All these smart, elegant, gifted people who would fuel my love of—and desire for deep friendships with—extraordinary women.

Between the ages of five and fourteen I stole as many kisses and fondles as I could from the girls of my social group until suddenly, one miraculous God-flouting night, I was given permission to enter the Promised Land. I was fourteen years old and visiting my ex-girlfriend and her mother, Mrs G.

'Are you still awake, David?' Mrs G called from her bedroom.

'Hmm,' I mumbled, feigning sleep in the living room.

'Are you still awake?'

'Yes, sort of,' I half whispered, wanting her to think I was asleep. Crazy as it sounds, I was still wearing shorty pyjamas. They were my favourite. They had red trains on them.

'Come in here and keep me company,' she said.

'Sorry?' I replied, no longer remotely sleepy.

I'd had a strong sense this was going to be the night of a major train derailment after we'd gone to see *The Graduate* at the Rose Bay Wintergarden Theatre that evening. Mrs G could have taken her daughter and me to see *Gone With the Wind* or *The Dirty Dozen*, but she hadn't. She'd chosen that epoch-defining movie in which Dustin Hoffman's bumbling Benjamin Braddock is seduced by Anne Bancroft's older, sexually aggressive Mrs Robinson.

'Do you find me undesirable?' Mrs Robinson asks Benjamin.

'Oh no, Mrs Robinson,' Benjamin replies, 'I think, I think you're the most attractive of all my parents' friends.'

My parents barely knew Mrs G, but they were trusting—or clueless—enough to think that if I stayed the night at her house I would return home the same boy who had gone off to the movies the day before. They hadn't seen *The Graduate*.

'Come in here,' my Mrs Robinson called again from her bedroom. 'I want you to keep me company.'

By this time, my train was beginning to hoot and steam and move steadily up the tracks.

I got out of bed—actually a couch in the living room of her small apartment—and moved cautiously towards her bedroom. My ex-girlfriend was asleep in the next room and her brother, two years younger, was shut away in a third bedroom down the hall. Mr G was no longer living with the family, so the coast was clear for me to step into the marital chamber and perch myself, shivering, on the end of Mrs G's bed.

She was dressed in a soft pink nightgown and was watching Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn having a domestic argument in black and white. The film was *Charade*.

'You look cold. Get in here,' she said, patting the sheets next to her.

'I'll be okay,' I squeaked.

'Don't be silly, David—get in here and watch the movie with me.'

The train was now beginning to throb and career out of control.

'Isn't that better?' she said, putting her hand inside my pyjama pants.

Suddenly my manhood was leaping from the rail yard, searching for a tunnel through the shorts and into the waiting clutches of my veteran conductor. No kissing, no fondling, no lovemaking, just a passionless late-night shunting from Bewilderment Station to Mercy Street.

I decided not to stay and watch Cary Grant repair his relationship with Audrey Hepburn. After fifteen minutes I went back to the couch and tried to sleep. Within an hour my caboose had begun to rattle once more.

'I thought you'd be back,' she said, barely stirring, and this time pulling me on top of her. Within seconds I was plunging into what I thought was the deepest point of entry into her dark cave. I found myself abseiling down the walls. *Must be somewhere here*, I thought before she took me in her white witch's hand and guided me into the widest, warmest, wettest place I'd ever had the holy pleasure of finding myself in.

I came like a fire hose within twenty seconds ... No, make that ten. But this time I had the good sense to take hold of the church bells under her nightgown and give them a mighty good tweaking.

They were fine breasts too, round and ample in my small hands, and I remember lying there on top of her in the hours before dawn, thinking: 'The guys at school are never going to believe this.'

She must have read my mind because she said to me, 'Now this is strictly between you and me, David—you know that, don't you?'

I nodded vigorously, having absolutely no intention of ever keeping my word.

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As I was still good friends with Mrs G's daughter I went back to their place on a regular basis for the next nine months. Once a fortnight, on average, I would take the school bus in the opposite direction to home and go and shag my ex-girlfriend's mother. Usually she'd have music on—the new Crosby, Stills and Nash album, David Bowie's *The Man Who Sold the World*—and there'd be incense burning as I walked into the kitchen for a glass of milk and an arrowroot biscuit.

'How was school?' she'd ask, but I knew she wasn't the slightest bit interested in what I'd learnt that day because, mid-stream, she'd wander off into the living room singing along with Stephen Stills' lyrics: 'Wooden ships on the water, very free ...'

I'd follow her a few minutes later with a milk moustache and a violent heaving in my shorts to find her sitting on the couch with her dress hoisted up around her hips and her tanned legs opened wide, looking at me with the first pair of bedroom eyes I'd ever encountered.

'You took long enough,' she'd say with a dirty smirk, and I knew there wasn't going to be any maths homework that afternoon.

Sometimes we'd linger on the couch for fifteen minutes while she undid my school tie and shirt with quick, deft fingers. At other times I'd walk into her apartment to find her already in the bedroom. No glass of milk or arrowroot in sight. No unloosening of the school tie. Just a quick advance into her Red-Light District.

In the evening we'd have dinner—the mother, her children and me—and we'd watch television afterwards before cleaning our teeth and going to bed. (It was assumed I'd be staying the night on the couch.) In the morning, after late-night sex

with Mrs G, and cornflakes and tea with her son and daughter, I'd take the bus to school.

One night, shortly before it all ended, my ex-girlfriend walked into her mother's bedroom and found us between the sheets. 'You slut, Mum,' she said, slamming the door.

Although I haven't seen Mrs G for forty-three years, I've often thought about her—not in the tormented way that Bernard Schlink's character, Michael Berg, obsessed about Hanna Schmitz in *The Reader*, but certainly with a sense of astonishment and disbelief. Why would she have wanted to deflower a boy in shorty pyjamas, and where did she go in subsequent years with all those unlawful desires?

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During that first year in New Orleans I gave myself over to love, while at the same time trying to prove myself worthy of a place in the great enterprise that was American journalism. The two tended to go hand in hand. A young man with a press pass, a foreign accent and an apartment in the French Quarter was a man with considerable access. I would have been a fool not to have made full use of it.

The newspaper had decided—sensibly enough—to ease me into the city slowly, sending me off during my first week to cover a murder trial with their senior court reporter. I was given the task of adding colour to the court reporting, rather than covering the trial itself, just in case I failed to understand the finer points of Louisiana's French-drafted Napoleonic legal system.

Over the ensuing weeks and months the assignments became more regular. Before being given the AIDS beat, I was asked to write about city hall politics, education, race relations, popular culture and the local fallout from Nicaragua's

Sandinista revolution. I ventured into black housing projects, white uptown mansions, courtrooms, police stations and jazz bars. I headed north-west along the petro-chemical corridor of Interstate 10 to Baton Rouge to report on the International Special Olympics and the workings of the state legislature where, fifty years earlier, Governor Huey Long had reigned over his citizenry before being mortally wounded in the State Capitol building, only to be replaced by his brother Earl who, for a while, governed the state from a mental hospital.

After Baton Rouge I spent a month in St Bernard Parish, south-east of New Orleans, writing about armed robberies, bashings and murders, and being treated like an exotic bird by the sheriff and his staff. ‘Henree,’ the secretary would twang each morning as I pushed through the white picket gate leading to Sheriff Henry’s office, ‘Aw-straylya’s here.’

I’d never encountered a place like St Bernard Parish before. It might have been known for the famous Battle of New Orleans fought one hundred and seventy years earlier, but to me it was *Deliverance* country—a patchwork of swamps and bayous populated by hillbillies, oyster farmers and Spanish Cajuns who played zydeco and spoke an incomprehensible dialect. Twenty-two years later this whole parish would be wiped out by the fury of Hurricane Katrina and the seven-metre wall of water that smashed through the levees. There would not be a home left standing, but in 1983 it felt like the parish had been there forever, and would stay that way too.

I’m not sure at what point the editors of the newspaper decided they could trust me with important assignments, but it might have come after the Saturday-night murder of a young woman on her way to a friend’s birthday party. The twenty-

three-year-old fashion student, Patti Owens, had only been a few doors from her friend's apartment when two young men—and, yes, they happened to be black—drove by, one of them shooting her in the back.

When I got the call from the editor the next morning I was as hung-over as I'd ever been, thanks to an obscene number of frozen margaritas the night before. The editor wanted me to visit Patti Owens' parents and find out what I could about their dead daughter.

'She always had dreams,' her mother said, as she showed me through Patti's bedroom, pointing to the unfinished oil painting on the mantle.

I hated every minute I was there, but the story ran on the front page the following day.

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When I left New Orleans after twelve months, I was seven kilograms heavier and twice the reporter I'd been on my arrival, thanks to editor Jim Amoss and his colleagues. I'd conquered some of my anxieties by writing my way into legitimacy and favour. I'd made half a dozen close friends, forged a lifelong connection to one of the most fascinating cities in the world (without ever discovering the joys of jazz!) and developed insights into the American psyche that would help balance all the left-wing assumptions I'd carried for years.

My visa was renewed for a year and I headed to Washington, D.C., to join the Newhouse News Service as correspondent for the Springfield *Daily News* in Massachusetts. I'd never been to Massachusetts before, let alone Springfield, but as with New Orleans this didn't seem to matter much. A vacancy had miraculously opened up in the Washington bureau, and on the basis of my experience in the Deep

South—no, scrap that—on the basis of my father being who he was, the gates to the Newhouse kingdom were again flung open for me.

With exactly one year's reporting experience in the United States I now had the job of covering national politics for a newspaper I'd never read, reporting to editors I'd never met, writing for a city and state I'd never visited, and speaking to readers I had not the foggiest notion about.

If New Orleans had given me cold feet, this was far worse. As with New Orleans I didn't know anyone in the city, but in Washington, D.C., it took years to cultivate the kind of professional contacts that mattered. I had a few days to work out where Capitol Hill and the White House were, find out the names of the congressmen from Massachusetts, and get to work.

There was plenty to do. It was 1983 and Ronald Reagan had been orchestrating a covert war against Nicaragua's left-wing government, while also supporting right-wing death squads in neighbouring El Salvador. Acid rain was killing waterways all across America, including up to seventy per cent of the lakes, streams and reservoirs of Massachusetts. The economy was failing and American cities were in fast decay, with soup kitchen lines becoming an ever-present feature of daily life.

Many of Reagan's most vocal opponents were from Massachusetts—people like Paul Tsongas; Thomas (Tip) O'Neill, the Speaker of the House; Edward Kennedy, the state's senior senator; and Edward Boland, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. It was my job to get to know these men and their staffers, and to get the drop on stories that might be relevant to the good citizens of Springfield, Massachusetts.

The word ‘intimidated’ doesn’t even get close. One morning I actually found myself in a telephone booth on Capitol Hill with the entire American budget balanced on my knees. The 1984 US\$925 billion financial plan for America had just been released and I was dictating a story to a typist in Springfield about the effect this budget was going to have on my ‘home’ state. It didn’t help that I was on deadline and that the typist was having trouble understanding my accent. I was bathed in sweat, trying to decipher how millions of dollars worth of disbursements would affect a place I’d never visited. I had no idea what I was talking about, but the story, like practically every other one I wrote, made its way to page one by dint of the fact that I was based in the nation’s capital.

During my year in Washington I lived in a basement apartment in Georgetown, the elite neighbourhood by the Potomac River where the then senator John F. Kennedy and his wife Jackie had resided, and where Ben Bradlee, editor of the *Washington Post*, and his top investigative reporter, Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, were still living.

I didn’t meet either man, but I did end up interviewing Woodward by phone a couple of years later when a new book accused him of being the ‘cat’s paw’ for a military spy operation inside the Nixon White House. His former naval role, the book alleged, was the key to Woodward’s legendary Watergate investigation and the identity of ‘Deep Throat’. Unwittingly I was doing the authors’ bidding when I phoned the legendary reporter at home one evening.

‘Bob Woodward?’

‘Yes.’

'David Leser's my name. I'm from the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s colour magazine, *Good Weekend*.'

'How can I help you?'

'A book called *Silent Coup: The Removal of Richard Nixon*, by Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, has been published. Have you heard of it?'

'Only vaguely.'

'That's surprising. It mentions you a lot.'

'Really?'

'Yes, it describes you as a communications liaison officer between the Pentagon and the White House prior to becoming a reporter.'

'Who did you say you were again?'

'David Leser.'

'Thank you for your call.' Click.

This is not an exact account of what was said but it's close. Bob Woodward was not amused, nor do I blame him. It was a fantastic case study of impertinence (mine) masquerading as fearless interrogation. Without realising it I'd decided to target America's most famous reporter in the vain hope that some of his gold dust might drift my way. It didn't. The story never ran and many of the claims in the book were later discredited.

Washington was that kind of town for me. A year spent close to power but far from its triggers and levers, as well as its repercussions. Acid rain was falling on the lakes of New England but I never actually went to see the destruction for myself. I should have gone to the north-west of the state to see the dead fish and the fouled

waterways, just as I should have taken a flight down to Managua and San Salvador to get a first-hand account of Washington's dirty war in Central America.

I was young and out of my depth. One morning Robert McNamara, the architect of the Vietnam War, came striding towards me down Pennsylvania Avenue, his face ruddy from the cold, his jacket collar turned up against the wind, his gimlet eyes fixed on the pavement. For a moment I imagined bailing him up and demanding an explanation for the whole catastrophe that was Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. I would demand—on behalf of my indignant generation—some answers.

*How does it feel to have so much blood on your hands, Mr McNamara? Is it difficult to sleep at night? Do you ever think of yourself as a war criminal?*

Nearly twenty years later, documentary film-maker Errol Morris would illustrate the best way to elicit answers from someone like the former American Secretary of Defense—not by crusading for a cause, using tricks, or behaving like a bloodhound, but rather by waiting and listening, by having the good sense to know that the truth was to be found not by trying to shame a man, but by trying to humanise him.

In *Fog of War* Morris was able to persuade McNamara to expound on the lessons of war in general: that its architects needed to empathise with their enemy, that they needed to be prepared to examine their reasoning for waging war, and that they needed to understand that human nature could not be changed.

I was still a long way from these subtleties and I was a long way from understanding that a deeply complex man such as Robert McNamara might warrant the slightest sympathy. It was much easier to live in a clearly defined world of good and bad, right and wrong, than to have to wrestle with uncomfortable ambiguities.

I didn't like uncertainty, and yet, if truth be told, I was often gripped by it, on big issues as well as small. At night I would sit for hours in my tiny airless basement apartment, wondering what to do with myself. Would I go out for dinner on my own, or cook myself another bowl of ratatouille and rice? Would I watch Ted Koppel interviewing a Washington insider, or read the book that Seymour Hersh had written on the Nixon White House? Would I pour myself a drink or roll a joint, or do both? Would I put a call in to Australia or call the woman I'd met the previous week at the Redskins' game? Would I work the phone in order to try to expand my contact list beyond the perfunctory, or just go to bed?

One evening, at dusk, a family walked past my window and peered down from the laneway onto my little tableau of indecision. I was wondering about the drink or the joint, hoping perhaps the phone would ring, or that my landlord—a leading television producer with CBS—might invite me up for dinner (he never did). I felt the gaze from three pairs of eyes fall on me as I sat on the couch staring at the floor.

Grabbing the newspaper, I began poring over the day's headlines, hoping desperately that they'd seen a young man casually reading the paper after a long day at the office, not some no-hoper staring into space.

That became my strongest memory of my year in Washington, D.C.,—not covering Congress, or visiting the White House, or reporting on dirty wars in Central America, or getting to know one of America's top Middle Eastern experts, or visiting the Smithsonian Institute, or playing my first game of baseball or delighting in the cherry blossoms of spring. Rather, it was getting caught in the act of doing nothing while pretending to be doing something!

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When I returned to Australia at the beginning of 1985, after two years in America, one of the things I most longed for was to finally prove myself—and be accepted—as a journalist in my own right. That might sound like a rerun of the American experience and, of course, in a way it was.

Unfortunately I struck Piers Akerman, then deputy editor of Rupert Murdoch's national newspaper, the *Australian*. I was hired by the paper's editor, Alan Farrelly, to work on news and features but Akerman let it be known from day one that he deplored the decision.

'Why have you got it in for Leser?' the chief of staff, John Lyons (now Middle East correspondent for the newspaper), asked Akerman several months after I'd started. By this time it had become clear to Lyons that Akerman was vetoing most of the stories I was being assigned.

'Because he trades on his father's name,' Akerman replied.

'Who's his father?' Lyons replied.

'Bernard Leser, publisher of *Vogue*.'

'I never knew that,' Lyons said.

Lyons never knew that because I'd never told him. It was the last thing I intended telling him, or any of my other colleagues for that matter, but Ackerman had formed the view that I was only on the newspaper by dint of my father.

I suspect this was partly true. Before returning to Australia, I'd asked News Ltd's New York correspondent, Sally Macmillan, if she could pave the way for an introduction to Alan Farrelly. Farrelly and I met in Sydney and he offered me a job.

Whether this was because Sally Macmillan had told him I was the son of Bernie Leser, I'll never know. What I do know is that I never mentioned it to him.

What I also know is that from day one Piers Akerman decided to make my life a misery. The tension with him reached its apotheosis in January 1986, when I was sent by the editor-in-chief, Les Hollings, to cover the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia, particularly as it was being played out in the eastern state of Terengganu. I'd been given the assignment on the strength of an interview I'd done two months earlier with former prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, who'd been visiting Australia, partly to warn us of the growing threat posed by radical Islam.

My brief was to spend ten days moving among the paddy fields, fishing hamlets, small towns and urban centres of Malaysia to gauge the extent to which the country's Islamic opposition party was winning the hearts and minds of the people. I was to write a 5000-word cover story for the weekend edition of the paper, as well as produce five or six other stories during those ten days, including two pieces on the impending execution of two Australians for drug trafficking.

I was with a staff photographer in the north of the country, heading by taxi to our hotel when, after days of tight deadlines and caustic phone calls from Akerman in Sydney, the tension inside me finally exploded. A curfew was in place because of religious unrest and we only had a short time in which to cross the border from Terengganu to Penang, via Kelantan and Terak. After 10 pm no cars were allowed on the roads. My deadline for the story was the following morning and we were still 100 kilometres from our hotel. It was now 9 pm and the driver was going too slow. I asked him to go faster, but the roads were dark and potholed. The speedometer stayed on sixty. I asked him again to speed up. No response. We then rounded a

bend and there, straight in front of us, was a cow lumbering across the road. There was nothing the driver could do. We hit the creature side on and its belly exploded on impact, splattering our windscreen with blood and steaming offal.

'WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?' I screamed. 'YOU COULD HAVE KILLED US. YOU FUCKING KILLED A COW. IT'S ALL OVER THE CAR. WE'VE GOT TO GET TO OUR HOTEL BEFORE THEY SHOOT US. JESUS, THERE'S COW ALL OVER THE CAR.'

We got to our hotel at about midnight and for the next eight hours I chain-smoked my way through the pitch hours, tearing out sheets of paper from my Olivetti typewriter and crumpling them up until I finally had a version of the story I liked.

The following morning I spent two hours dictating it to a typist in Sydney and then collapsed in the pool and ordered two cocktails in quick succession. It was the first time I'd relaxed in ten days.

On my return to Sydney, Akerman appeared at my desk one morning, demanding an explanation for the cocktails on my expense account. 'What's the meaning of this?' he said, slapping the Malaysian receipts down.

'What's the problem?' I asked, returning his hateful gaze.

'Since when do you order cocktails on this newspaper's expense?' he snarled.

'Look, Piers, I wrote seven stories for you in ten days. All I had during that time away was you barking at me down the phone. I delivered all that you asked of me and more. Now you want me to justify two cocktails?'

'Yes, I do.'

That was our relationship for two years—mutual hatred—with Akerman unleashing a constant barrage of insults and innuendo, and me occasionally hitting back with whatever feeble firepower I could muster.

Not long after the Malaysian trip I was appointed acting foreign editor of the paper. My task during the 4 pm till midnight shift was to sift through the evening's international stories and then choose the best ones to fill the foreign pages of the next day's second edition.

One evening I decided to remove a photograph from the second edition that had appeared in the paper's first edition. It was of Prince Charles's bald spot. The photo and accompanying caption had been sent from the London bureau and was designed—in my opinion—to gently mock the heir to the British throne because of his vegetarian diet. The more vegetables you ate, so the implication of the photo and caption went, the more hair you lost. That, of course, was the problem with Charlie boy. Too many vegetables.

Even if you thought the photo had some amusing relevance, the main problem with running the photo so prominently in the foreign pages of the national newspaper was that the same photo also appeared towards the back of the paper in a section devoted to gossip and celebrity. Akerman had put the first edition of the paper to bed earlier that evening with the same item on two different pages.

I decided to replace it with a photo of Nicaraguan cripples being wheeled through the streets of the capital, Managua. It was a dramatic shot and, with an accompanying small news item from Central America, more relevant, I thought, to the foreign pages.

'What do you think you were doing last night?' Akerman demanded the following afternoon when I arrived for work.

'What are you talking about?' I replied.

'What were you doing running a story on those Marxist agitators in Nicaragua?'

'It was a good photo,' I said.

'It should never have been run.'

I couldn't contain myself any longer. 'Well, what were you doing publishing a photo of Prince Charles's bald spot TWICE?' I yelled.

'Get in here, you raging little ant,' Akerman bellowed, ordering me to his office and slamming the door. Our shouting went on for several minutes, Akerman accusing me of impertinence, me responding that he was a bully and a thug. How dare I speak to him like that? Who did I think I was? Didn't I know who I was speaking to? Yes, I surely did. The most loathsome individual I'd ever known, then and now. A man whose bullying management style was the antithesis of everything my father stood for.

And I was far from alone in that estimation. Akerman had targeted many journalists on the *Australian* and, later on, in other newsrooms where he was appointed to edit Murdoch newspapers. To me, however, this was a personal vendetta. Akerman was out to destroy if not my career, then certainly my morale, as if holding down a job on a national newspaper wasn't difficult enough.

I remember one day when Les Hollings walked over to me to ask if I'd read Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*. The book had only just been released. I was just

finishing off a story on industrial relations, my second story for the day, and no, I had not yet read Hughes's monumental tome.

'Well, you'd better hurry up and read it,' Hollings said crossly, 'because you're interviewing Hughes this afternoon and we're running the story on page one tomorrow.'

It was three o'clock. The interview was in an hour's time, the deadline for the first edition in three hours. The book was 603 pages long.

That was the schizophrenic nature of news reporting. Nothing to do for hours on end, then suddenly an assignment at short notice, a flurry of phone calls, a dash to meet the interviewee, frantic last-minute checking and rechecking of facts, then sitting down to write a crisp, clean, entertaining piece of prose.

The work was thrilling but stressful and the stress was compounded if you happened to be at war with your boss. I'd been experiencing stabbing pains in my chest for weeks. I was thirty years old and already suffering from acute anxiety.

I complained to Les Hollings about Akerman several times, to no avail. The man was a protected species at News Ltd, as Rupert Murdoch would make clear a few years later when he appointed him editor-in-chief of the *Herald and Weekly Times* Group in Melbourne, and then vice-president of Fox News in America. Piers Akerman, he said, was one of News Ltd's 'greatest assets'.

Needless to say, during the years of the Howard government, Akerman, along with broadcaster Alan Jones, became the prime minister's pin-up media personality, and it was easy to see why. Akerman's *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* columns were invariably vicious, partisan attacks on all the predictable Murdoch targets—trade unions, federal and state Labor governments, environmentalists,

Republicans, drug reformers, asylum seekers, homosexuals and any commentator vaguely left of centre.

One of Akerman's strengths for Murdoch—apart from his undoubtedly intelligence and wit—was his preparedness to savage those with whom he disagreed politically, and often those with whom he worked. His claim in 1991 to *Sunday Age* journalist Caroline Wilson that if he was 'ever accused of bias' he 'would roll on the floor laughing' was in itself beyond laughable. His bias was—and remains to this day—legendary, and his behaviour even more problematic.

During his subsequent years as editor-in-chief of the Adelaide *Advertiser* and of the *Herald and Weekly Times* he was accused of violent intimidation by one female staff member in Adelaide and sexual harassment by at least three others.

Such was the clamour and indignation surrounding his name during an industrial dispute at the *Herald-Sun* in 1991 that when his face appeared in an office window one afternoon a group of picketing employees below began chanting, 'Jump, jump, jump.'

Akerman refused to do so, but after two years of working with him on the *Australian*, I did just that. I jumped to Jerusalem.

Postscript: A few years later my father bumped into Akerman at Wiltons restaurant in Jermyn Street in London. Akerman apparently saw my father walking past his table and, as my father recounted, was so eager to say hello that when he stood up he knocked a glass of red wine all down his front. 'I thought you'd be pleased to know that,' my father told me the next day.

## YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE JEWISH

*Tell me, now that you are all finished at fourteen being a Jew, do you know a single thing about the wonderful history and heritage of the saga of your people?*

Jack Portnoy to his son, Alex, in Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

Like Alex Portnoy in Philip Roth's uproarious novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, when I first arrived in Israel in 1977 I was something of an exile from my Jewish history—not to mention religious traditions and laws.

True, I'd learned all the important Old Testament stories at Sunday school; I'd absorbed a sense of cultural and historical difference through what I'd gleaned from my parents and grandparents; I'd blessed the fruit from the vine and the bread of the earth at my family's Friday night Shabbat dinners, much to the amusement of my non-Jewish friends who were invited to join us. I'd fondled Jewish girls upstairs and downstairs and even learned a few Jewish jokes courtesy of the 1965 comedy album, *You Don't Have To Be Jewish*.

**The Astronaut:** Isn't it wonderful, Mama, that White and McDivitt went round the world sixty-two times.

**Mama (with strong Brooklyn accent):** So big deal. If you got money, you can travel. But to me all this had been largely devoid of spiritual meaning, as had the true human dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict that had begun during the late nineteenth century and then spilt over into full-scale war following the upheavals of Israel's creation in 1948.

I'd travelled to Israel that first time in late 1977—after first surviving the opium- and hash-filled dens of South-East Asia, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka—with all the ill-formed ideals of my youth: that here was a young pioneer nation that had reclaimed the swamps and made the deserts bloom; that had turned back the invading Arab hordes not once, but three times, in thirty years; that had restored the Jewish people to their ancient homeland after 2000 years of relentless wandering and persecution; and—here's the important thing—had known how to treat its minorities with compassion and decency.

I'd arrived as a student backpacker on a mission to re-enter the Old Testament. I would visit the ruins of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, climb the desert cliffs of Masada, pay homage in the Cave of the Patriarchs where the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah were located. I would be welcomed 'home' by my brothers and sisters as a suitor might be invited into the bedchamber of his paramour. That was my self-authored roman à clef—a young Australian Jew exercising his Right of Return, being warmly received in his 'homecoming'.

It didn't turn out like that. I had read Hebrew at Sunday school but I couldn't understand a thing that was being said to me; nor did I know anyone in the country except for my mother's closest friend, Pnina Salzman, Israel's leading classical pianist.

I felt estranged from the moment I stepped into the arrival hall of Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport.

'Where have you come from?' demanded Israeli customs officials. 'Who packed your bags? What is your mother's maiden name? How long are you planning to stay? What are you intending to do here?'

I'd never encountered such brash people in my life, and that was before being pushed out of the way on buses by old people muttering curses, and then having to listen to them quarrel and kvetch with each other for the entire ride. Everywhere an argument—in Hebrew, Russian, German, Polish, Yiddish, Hungarian, Czech: loud, tempestuous, fractious exchanges; shoutings from one side of the street to the other; howls of indignation in restaurants and cafés; finger-pointing and wild, angry gesticulations. And among all this the ubiquitous young soldiers, men and women of the Israel Defense Forces, with their come-hither eyes and their sub-machine guns slung insouciantly over their shoulders.

I didn't like what I was seeing and so a few days later I went to work on a kibbutz near the Lebanese border, where I discovered the joys of getting up at 3 am to haul great clusters of bananas to waiting trailers before the sun rose over the Jordan Valley. That gave me my first taste of the socialist pioneering spirit that had once inspired the founding fathers of the Jewish state.

I grew to like the physical work, but apart from the bomb shelters—where we would often gather to listen to Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* on an old stereo at night-time—I had no sense that I was in a war-torn region, hemmed in on all sides by hostile neighbours, or that the country was actually an occupying power disregarding the rights of a subject people—until I heard Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's impassioned plea in November 1977 to the Israeli people and, by extension, to Jews around the world.

*The Palestinian problem is the core and essence of the conflict and ... so long as it continues to be unresolved, the conflict will continue to aggravate, reaching new*

*dimensions. In all sincerity, I tell you that there can be no peace without the Palestinians. It is a grave error of unpredictable consequences to overlook or brush aside this cause.*

Sadat, arch-enemy-turned-peacemaker, would prompt me to return to Australia two months later and change my arts degree major from psychology to Middle Eastern studies. Having witnessed such an historic event, I was eager to know more about the origins of the Arab–Israeli conflict in general and the Palestinian–Israeli contest in particular; about the ways in which competing nationalisms—and religious absolutism—had entangled two people in a millennial struggle of epic proportions. I wanted to understand better the Arab world’s rejection of—and failure to reconcile itself to—the Jewish state. I wanted to understand something that I had simply never considered before: the historical hardships of the Palestinians caused by displacement, rejection and oppression, much of it at the hands of Jews.

And it was Dr Robert Springborg, the American-born Arabist, who was to give me that education on my return to Macquarie University in 1977. Springborg was one of the world’s leading experts on the Arab world. He had written books on Egyptian politics, Iraq and the Middle East more broadly. He had been a consultant on Arab governance and politics for American and United Nations organisations, and had worked on democratisation programs throughout the Middle East.

He was hated by the Jewish lobby, and in the late 1970s I fell under his spell. He introduced me to the complexities of the Arab League nations, and gave me a view of Middle Eastern history not filtered through pro-Israeli or Jewish eyes. He was the first person in my life to present the Arab as a human being, rather than as the

demonised ‘enemy’ who would have all Jews thrown into the sea. He laid out for me the extent of Palestinian suffering, how the burden of conquest, expulsion, poverty and humiliation had helped to radicalise a lost and subject people, and how this had happened through one of the greatest collisions in history: a collision between the Jewish and Arab people in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the post-colonial break-up of the Middle East into sovereign nation states.

Some of my Jewish friends were not impressed with this reorienting of my moral compass, among them Martin Indyk, also at that time a lecturer in politics at Macquarie University. Martin was the Australian Jewish son of my parents’ friends John and Mary Indyk, and he would eventually go on to become one of the world’s most powerful and insightful commentators on Middle Eastern affairs: founder of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; special assistant and then principal adviser to President Bill Clinton on Arab–Israeli issues, and later, in two separate stints, American ambassador to Israel, these last appointments earning him the distinction of being the first and only Jew—as well as foreign-born diplomat—to ever be appointed US ambassador to Israel.

During those years at Macquarie University—and later during my twelve months in Washington, D.C., in the early 1980s, Martin would attempt to counter what he believed was the egregious pro-Arab bias I had accepted unblinkingly from Robert Springborg. (In 1990–1991 Springborg would fall foul of the Hawke government and the Australian Jewish lobby for this perceived bias, particularly following his criticisms on the ABC of the government’s support for the American-led invasion of Iraq. This would so incense Bob Hawke that the prime minister would press for Springborg’s removal as a Middle Eastern commentator on the ABC.)

My parents were also perplexed by my new-found sympathy for the Arabs. My mother had been a member of Zionist youth groups in Sydney and, from 1941 to 1946, my father had served as founder/president of the Zionist Youth Movement in Auckland. In 1944, he'd actually established the first camp for Jewish boys and girls in New Zealand and, from 1965 to 1971, had been publicity chairman in Sydney for the United Israel Appeal. Their support for Israel was steadfast, but they would always listen to my views with tolerance and patience.

Not so my maternal grandmother, Hansey Simblist, a woman I loved and feared in equal measure, and who believed until the day she died that on the subject of Middle Eastern politics, I'd been hoodwinked by the wrong version of history—the Arab version, not the Jewish. Like most Jews of her generation—and indeed later generations—she viewed the creation of Israel through the lens of the Holocaust. She understood the Jewish craving for, and conquest of, Zion as a final deliverance and redemption from a history of vilification and extermination.

In 1940, she and her uncle, Jack Davis, had actually gone to see Arthur Calwell, the then Australian Minister for Immigration, to plead with him for visas for her forty-seven relatives in Latvia. Both of them had believed, as had many people at the time, that the Nazis were preparing to march on Riga and that the country would soon be lost; that their family needed to get out soon or perish. Whatever they'd said to Calwell that day in 1940 must have worked, because by the time the two of them left his office they'd managed to secure the visas. All the aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces and cousins would be allowed to resettle in Australia.

'You won't believe it,' my grandmother told them by telephone soon afterwards. 'We've got them—visas for all of you. You can come to Australia. We'll

find you somewhere to live. It will be a simple life at first but you'll see—you'll love it.

The beaches, the harbour, the sunshine ...'

And then the fateful reply: 'But why would we want to come to a godforsaken country like Australia when our homes are here? Everything is fine. The Germans won't come.'

But, of course, the Germans did come and all those relatives—except for one who escaped into the forest—were forced to dig their own graves before being shot in the back of the head.

My grandmother's sense of Jewishness was so entrenched that when her second daughter, my aunty Dinee, asked her for her blessing to marry her non-Jewish college professor, my grandmother stubbornly refused. 'No daughter of mine is going to marry a goy,' she said.

My aunt responded by marrying her professor anyway, in a secret ceremony at a registry office. She eventually left Australia for America, never to grace her mother's doorstep again. My grandmother lived with that regret for the rest of her days, but it never translated into an acceptance of non-Jews into our family.

Her views were primitive, tribal and perfectly understandable, and in the case of Israel, she would brook no dissent. She believed that after centuries of annihilation, it was only right and proper that the Jews finally had a homeland of their own. I didn't disagree with that proposition. What I found decidedly awkward was that any discussion of Palestinian rights was always dismissed with a wave of the hand and a recourse to all the familiar Zionist arguments—that in stark contrast to 1000 years of Arab indolence and backwardness, the Jews had made the desert bloom after a few short years of enterprise; that there was no such thing as a

Palestinian nation; that the Jews had wanted them to stay in Israel but that the Arabs had decided to flee; that they'd rejected the 1947 Partition Plan for Palestine; and—here was the big one—there was plenty of land for all the Arabs, except that the Arabs had no interest in helping these so-called Palestinians because they were only hell-bent on waging war against the Jews.

I'd heard these jeremiads time and again, and whenever I offered her a different point of view—yes, one often informed by Springborg's lectures—she'd chide me: 'Then why don't you just go off with your Palestinian friends?'

'Oh, Nan,' I'd plead. 'Don't be like that.'

'Where do you get your views from?' she'd continue. 'We lost everyone in the Holocaust and you should support the Arabs now?'

'But, Nan, it wasn't their fault what Hitler did. They didn't kill the Jews.'

'Well, they're killing them now.'

'That's because the Palestinians were displaced.'

'What Palestinians?'

'The Arabs who lived there prior to the creation of the state of Israel.'

'There aren't any Palestinians. They're all Arabs.'

'Nan, that's their identity. They think of themselves as Palestinians.'

'And you should think of yourself as a Jew.'

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In 1982 I visited Israel for the second time, and spent three months there freelancing before taking up the position on the *Times-Picayune*. Depending on one's point of view, my timing was either very good or very bad. The Israelis were about to invade Southern Lebanon in an attempt to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization

(PLO), which had set up a state-within-a-state after its expulsion from Jordan twelve years earlier.

Operation Peace for Galilee began a few weeks after my arrival with a full-scale incursion into Southern Lebanon. It ended with the deadly siege of Beirut and the massacre by Lebanese Christian militia (under the protection of Israeli forces) of more than 800 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

I didn't get to Beirut but I went into Southern Lebanon with Israeli forces, visiting the largely Shiite town of Nabatieh, as well as the ancient Phoenician port city of Sidon, where the PLO had established its bases. As with many 'liberating' armies, the Israelis were greeted at first with flowers and jubilation, until their so-called 'liberation' turned into a disastrous eighteen-year-long occupation.

That was my first limited exposure to war. It was also the year I met the aptly named Talya Press, at that time press liaison officer for the World Zionist Organization.

Talya had arrived in Israel as a sixteen-year-old, hoping to turn a new page in the Promised Land. Something had happened to her back in Philadelphia that had caused such grief and confusion that one day she'd simply decided to pack her bags and come to Israel. What that 'something' was she never told me.

Talya was fluent in four languages and knew Israel intimately. She was passionate, smart and forthright, and had strikingly beautiful lapis lazuli eyes. One evening she invited me to her Jerusalem apartment for dinner following a tour of the Judaean Desert and Dead Sea. After a dinner of couscous and red wine from the slopes of Mount Carmel she asked me to stay the night. I stayed for the next three months.

We became lifelong friends, despite our sometimes conflicting views on the Arab–Israeli conflict. Like my grandmother and parents, and many of the Jews I knew, she believed I'd been hopelessly compromised by my university lecturer and my left-leaning friends in Australia. At night we would smoke Marlboro Lights on her verandah overlooking the rooftops of West Jerusalem, and she would talk about the Jews who had turned the desert into a modern-day Garden of Eden; who had extended the hand of peace to the Arabs many times over; who had, in 1948, when the Jewish state was being created, tried to persuade the fleeing Arabs to stay, in spite of hysterical cries from the Arab capitals that they should run for their lives.

Under a blue-black sky, with the smell of Jerusalem pines all around us, we would dive down into the underworld of the Jewish experience—the early anti-Semitism of Christianity, the blood libels of centuries, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the expulsions, the ghettos, the pogroms, the death camps, the mass killings ... and then, after all this, the Great Return to where we now sat, inside this ancient city of holy contest. Still no peace. Still rejected. Still beleaguered. Still misunderstood.

I would listen to Talya and offer my own still forming rebuttals on behalf of the Palestinians, half believing what I was saying, half enjoying being devil's advocate. Our arguments would rage on into the early hours of the morning, when we would fall into bed. I would sleep with my own small army of angels until awakened by Talya's screaming and flailing arms as she did battle with the unnamed ghosts of her past.

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When I left the *Australian* to return to Israel in 1987, I was thirty-one years old. After my studies in Middle Eastern politics and my two previous visits to the region I was

determined to become a Jerusalem-based correspondent. Piers Akerman, the man who had made the newsroom a living hell during my two years on the paper, made the move easy. Merran Morrison made the move infinitely more difficult.

I'd first met Merran at the age of fourteen, when we'd come together at a garage party on Sydney's Lower North Shore. She'd arrived with a boy called John. I'd fetched up with a girl called Belinda. We swapped partners halfway through the night, getting high on Black Sabbath's 'Paranoid', dancing and kissing to Van Morrison's 'Moondance'. Then we didn't see each other again for fifteen years.

'Hi, aren't you Merran Morrison?' I said to her in a vegetarian takeaway shop in Paddington one day in 1985.

'And aren't you David Leser?'

I remember the shiver of excitement I felt at seeing her again, even though she was now living in Canada and only in Australia for a short while. She was having a farewell party the following week and asked if I would come. Yes, I would. 'I'll ring you,' she said. And she did, but I never got the message.

Then, eighteen months later, in September 1986, I walked into a party and there she was, in white pants that looked like Jean Miró had gone to work on them, no bra and pert little breasts that brushed up against her purple silk top. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and her skin was the colour of honey, the curve of her mouth full and sensuous. I knew immediately I wanted to kiss her long and deep and soon.

Later that night we walked hand in hand through Kings Cross, past St Luke's Hospital, and up the stairs of my terrace into my studio apartment where, before undressing, she said to me, 'I'm in love with another man.'

'Who's that?' I answered as casually as I could.

'His name is Pierre and he's Canadian.'

She'd been with him three months—but did she know that I, too, was born in Montreal and had a Canadian passport? No, she hadn't realised that. Did she not think it better to shop at the local store than the international supermarket? No, not necessarily, she said.

'Well, that's fine,' I replied, 'as long as you don't think of Pierre while we're making love.'

And she didn't, and we did, and that was the night of our first coming together, nearly two decades after we'd danced in that garage as teenagers. Our timing, however, was slightly out. A few days before we'd met again, I'd been in Burma writing a story on the country's forgotten Jews, a community which, during the middle part of the nineteenth century, had reached its zenith with a population of about 3000 and by 1986, the year of my visit, had dwindled to less than thirty. On a train somewhere between the collapsing capital of Rangoon and the old royal seat of Mandalay I had made the decision to return to Israel to do two things: to establish myself as a Middle Eastern correspondent, and to make love to as many Israeli women as humanly possible.

Yes, okay, I wanted to report on the struggle for dominance and truth among the People of the Book and, by doing so, come to better understand my own Jewishness, and my own sense of responsibility towards the Palestinians, but I also wanted to sow a few more wild oats—and, if possible, all the way from the Lebanese border in the north to the Sinai Desert in the south, taking a circuitous route around the Arab villages and Bedouin camps of the Negev, charting a course from the shores

of Lake Tiberias over to the Mediterranean, then down to the improbable blue waters of the Red Sea.

I wanted to immerse myself in the Arab–Israeli conflict but I also wanted to drown in Jewish womanliness, in all the delirious combinations made possible by calamity and the consequent in-gathering of Jews from around the world.

I wanted wild congress with blue-eyed Hungarian maidens and dark-eyed Yemenites, many of whose grandmothers had crossed the deserts of Arabia by camel just so I might meet their granddaughters in unholy union. I wanted to drink from the hybrid cup of North African tailors and European merchants and to celebrate all the fine qualities that the Israeli-born Sabra woman boasted—thorny on the outside, soft with the fragrance of a desert fruit inside.

I had been hopelessly tormented by beautiful women ever since my little bullet train had jumped the tracks carrying its night mail into Mrs Robinson's bedroom. And it seemed to me that Israel was the cruellest trick of all to play on a Jewish man from the Diaspora: a nation of sun-kissed, beauteous, athletic females, many of whom were tank, artillery and parachute instructors, non-combat officers from crack commando units, bomb-disposal experts, flight controllers, jet-fighter mechanics and weapons technicians who could speak several languages, kill intruders with their bare hands and make gefilte fish and chicken noodle soup on demand.

Merran had ended her relationship with Pierre soon after our first night together, so this was a difficult thing to admit to the person I'd been with for the previous three months, and with whom I was actually imagining spending years with, if not the rest of my life. But the Israel imperative was greater at that time. I had

been contemplating going there for years prior to meeting Merran and I needed to get the place out of my system. So instead of continuing to work with the execrable Piers Akerman, and instead of continuing my relationship with Merran, I decided in March 1987—amid tears and declarations of love—to relocate to Jerusalem. ‘I need to go to Israel and write,’ I told her. ‘I love you and I’ll be back in six months,’ although, to be truthful, I didn’t quite know whether it would be six months or six years.

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A few short weeks after I arrived in Jerusalem, eighty-seven-year-old Father Lazarus made an unexpected entrance into my life. Father Lazarus was a Greek Orthodox monk who had lived as a hermit in a cave on the top of the Mount of Temptation for twenty-seven years. He’d gone there initially because the woman he loved had spurned him. That was in 1952, and two years later he’d found seclusion in a monastery an hour’s walk east of Bethlehem, out in the middle of the Judaean Desert. He spent three years there training to be a monk and then, in 1957, ventured further into the wilderness, going to live on the mountain top where Jesus had once waged his almighty struggle with the Devil. Together with a group of Palestinian refugees, he’d fashioned from the rock face a church, three rooms and a kitchen, and this was where he’d done battle with his soul every day for nearly three decades. Had he not fallen one day outside his cave and broken his leg, he might still have been holed up there instead of living in Jerusalem.

He was residing behind the ancient walls of the Old City in St Constantine’s monastery, working as an English-speaking guide for the hundreds of tourists visiting the Patriarchate’s museum. He still held the keys to his mountain grotto and he

agreed to let me take him back there so we might talk about what had prompted him to withdraw so completely from the world.

'I did this for my sins,' he said, as we sat outside his cave sipping coffee and looking down over the scorching desert where, two decades earlier, he'd seen tens of thousands of Palestinians fleeing the conquering Israeli forces during the Six-Day War. 'I was so desperate I came here for my salvation. I felt like the last man on earth.'

Father Lazarus's sin—as he saw it—was to have pledged marriage to a woman he met in Australia in 1925, promising to take her to America. After falling ill, he'd reneged on his pledge because he didn't think he would be able to look after her. 'It was a sin,' he said. 'If she was still alive I would bring her here now. Not for the flesh but for hers and my salvation.'

This young Greek-born man had left Australia for America after this broken pledge and in Brooklyn a few years later had met another woman, this time a Greek widow with a young son. He'd fallen in love with her and initially she'd accepted his marriage proposal, but after informing her that he wanted a child, she had withdrawn her pledge, just as he had done twenty years earlier with another woman. 'She promised to marry me but when I told her what I wanted she changed her mind. It was then I decided to become a monk.'

For some reason listening to this diminutive white-bearded man talk about sanctity and unrequited love affected me deeply. It made me think about how true love, with all its quarrels and follies, presents itself to us rarely and that to turn away from it would be to risk becoming 'the last man on earth'.

By 1987 my own parents had been married for thirty-five years and somehow they'd managed to create not just a family but also a history spanning decades, from the years immediately after the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel, to the Korean War, the sixties counterculture (not that they were ever part of it!) and the Vietnam War, and the transformation of a largely Anglo-Celtic society like Australia into a vibrant multicultural nation.

Father Lazarus had seen the sweep of history from his mountain cave 350 metres above sea level, but for three decades he had been utterly alone. Love had failed him. Love had gone unacknowledged, unanswered, and to me it seemed like I was now being presented with a parable of despair that I could use as a reference point for my own shifting affections.

From the moment I'd arrived in Israel, Merran and I had written each other love letters—sometimes ten, twelve, fourteen pages long, full of missing, hurting, needing, planning and longing. We also spoke on the phone, sometimes for an hour, trying to breathe each other in across the mass of land and water that stretched between us. And through all this missing and hurting and longing I came to realise just how much I loved and admired her, and also how much I relished the contrast between our family backgrounds, and between our differing sensibilities and skills.

Merran was an urban planner and a public-art curator who saw the world in visual, spatial terms. She saw lines and angles and symmetry where I saw nothing, or only vague shapes on the horizon. She could interpret architectural styles, fashions and trends the way a farmer could divine clues in a bank of clouds. She understood the urban environment, how the best cities evolved through a collaboration of

artists, architects, planners and designers, and how this collaboration could become a living, breathing work of art.

She was, in fact, a true Renaissance woman. She could design and draw and paint and sew and cook and write love letters as well as academic papers of high distinction, and she could turn her mind to politics, culture, religion, philosophy and art. One night, wearing a body-hugging French creation, she could be the most glamorous woman in the room; the next morning, dressed in gunpowder-stained overalls, she might be brandishing an oxyacetylene welder in the garage.

She was a pyrotechnic as well. She would lay detonators and load mortars on and off barges and choreograph firework shows—exquisite tableaux of light and heat that had audiences sucking in their breath. She was a cultural planner who could map a community's needs from a social, economic and political perspective. She could determine whether a community required a new library or more money for the surf club, or whether the rugby playing fields had become obsolete because the ethnic mix of the community had changed.

She could swim like a dolphin, effortlessly gliding through the water, stroke after beautiful stroke, and she could find her way through a strange city with dolphin-like sonar tracking. She was also a fearless traveller—arriving in Sri Lanka during the civil war, venturing to Central America during the height of the Death Squads, riding a motorbike across Bali.

The fourth of five daughters, she had grown up as one of a pack that had roamed the middle-class idyll of Sydney's Hunters Hill, a suburb where both her parents had been raised, and their parents and grandparents before them—not just in the same suburb, but in the very same street. All the sacred sites of this suburb

were firmly in place. The sandstone Presbyterian church, the football fields, tennis courts and bowling club, the jetty down at Woolwich Point where the ferries chugged back and forth each day to Circular Quay.

When she was four, Merran's father had shown her how to build a doll's house, and in this *bambino* Medici nursery he'd actually helped her install a miniature flushing toilet. My father would not have known what a toolshed looked like, let alone been able to guide me towards hammers and screwdrivers. Merran had gone on to study architecture at university before shifting to a planning degree, receiving high distinctions for most of her subjects.

By the time I was in Israel she was a highly paid public-art consultant for Darling Harbour, commissioning artworks for the redevelopment of what was still a largely derelict Sydney precinct.

Three months after I left for Israel she came for a two-week holiday. We had a glorious time together, wandering the souks of the Old City, visiting the Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock, driving through the still-to-erupt West Bank; floating on the Dead Sea and lunching on the shores of the Galilee.

And then, a few weeks after she'd returned to Sydney, everything suddenly changed.

'Hi, darling,' she said when I picked up the phone one night. 'You wouldn't believe what's happened—there's no job for me.'

'What do you mean there's no job?'

'He sacked me.'

'He can't sack you.'

'Well, he did. It's over. Can I come back to Israel?'

'That's terrible. Shit. I can't believe he's sacked you.'

'Yes ... Can I come back?'

'Look, I don't know, give me a minute—yes, I think so—I'm not sure. Oh, that's terrible. Let me call you back ...'

The problem was I'd met Rosie the week before in a bar in West Jerusalem. She'd slept in my bed that first night but we'd stopped just short of going too far. Still, I liked her, and I wanted more.

Now Merran was asking, 'What do you mean you don't know?'

'Well, you've only just left and psychologically I'm just getting over the fact you're not here—plus I've got all this work to do, and ... Can I think about it for a day or two?'

It was the wrong thing to say. Merran was distressed by my hesitancy, and understandably so.

My father happened to be in Jerusalem that day. In March 1987, at the same time I was arriving in Israel, he had been appointed the first non-American president of Condé Nast USA. He'd flown to Israel to spend a long weekend with me at the King David Hotel, that marvellous pile of pink limestone overlooking the Old City that Menachem Begin and his cohorts from the Irgun had blown up in 1946.

'What do you think, Dad? Should I tell her to come?' I asked him later that evening, pacing up and down his suite.

For a long time he didn't answer. Then he said, 'Well, it seems to me you've never loved anyone as much as you love Merran, and you've probably never been as loved by anyone as much as Merran loves you.'

'That's one point. The second point is she's deeply upset. This would be a huge blow to her, losing her job, and she's asking to come and see you. I don't see how you can say no. If you do, you risk throwing everything away.'

He was right. Merran was the love of my life. We'd known each other since we were fourteen and even though there'd been sixteen years between meetings, it was like we'd lived inside each other's skin forever. We shared the same love of books, films, music, people, politics and food. We were both Australian. We both spoke English. We both came from middle-class homes in Sydney. We had a lot going for us.

On the other hand there was Rosie—free and desirous of me in her little sandstone apartment on Mount Scopus. 'Come over on Tuesday night,' she'd said in her thick Hebrew-accented English.

Life is a series of choices and these choices determine everything that follows. Here was my choice: one road leading into the heart of Israeli society, via Rosie's bed; the other pointing towards home, back to Australia.

To say no to Merran would have meant the end of the most important relationship I'd known. It would have meant, in all likelihood, starting a relationship with Rosie, and if things had worked out, probably coming to know her family and friends, learning Hebrew, becoming more entrenched in Israeli society, possibly staying for years.

I was partly receptive to this, and already imagining the possibilities of an Israeli wife, Jewish children and a roving brief as a Middle Eastern correspondent. That was the right fork, leading through wounded, haunting landscapes, past ancient

cities and armistice lines, along valley rifts and on to coastal plains soaked in the blood of the ages.

The left fork pointed towards the bays and beaches of Sydney, towards family and friends and all that was comfortable and familiar. ‘I could never live in Australia,’ the spokesman for the Israeli foreign ministry had told me one day. ‘Too boring. Nothing happens there.’

By Israeli standards nothing did happen there. A people at peace in a big brown land on the edge of the world.

I chose the left fork. ‘Darling, of course you can come back,’ I said the following night when I called. ‘I’m sorry I hesitated. When can you get here?’

And then afterwards to Rosie: ‘Look, about Tuesday night—I’d love to, I really would, but my girlfriend is coming back from Australia. I’m not sure where we can take this.’

‘Oh, that’s too bad,’ she replied. ‘Perhaps we won’t see each other again, no?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘So have a good life, yes?’

‘Yes. You too.’

## WELCOME TO GAZA

Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem in March 1987, I wrote my first article for the English-language Hong Kong newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*. It was on the looming international peace conference being sponsored by the Americans, one that was causing bitter divisions within Israel's 'national unity' government over whether to exchange land for peace.

I wrote the story on a Toshiba laptop, printed it out on a machine that weighed nearly more than my packed suitcase, presented it to the military censors and then sent it by express post to Hong Kong for the princely sum of thirty-four shekels, which was nearly a hundred Australia dollars at the time.

Two weeks later I received a copy of the story in the mail and, to my utter joy and amazement, there it was spread out as the lead feature in the foreign section of the Saturday paper. Israel at the Crossroads ... David Leser, in a special article for the *South China Morning Post*, reports from Jerusalem.

What did I do when I saw the results of my labour? I'll tell you what I did. I jumped on my bed and started doing a jig. If you'd happened to be looking in the window from outside you would have seen a short man with thinning hair, his eyes closed and hands raised aloft, crying, 'I've done it! I've done it!'

And had you knocked politely on his door and asked him what he was doing and who he thought he was at that moment, he would have told you the unvarnished truth—that, at this moment, he was nothing less than the reawakened King David, son of Jesse, slayer of Goliath, conqueror of Jerusalem, harpist, poet, adulterer and uniter of warring tribes. It was *he* dancing on a bed in West Jerusalem

in 1987 disguised as an Australian Jewish journalist; *he* who had returned to write modern-day psalms in the form of feature articles for an English-language newspaper in Hong Kong—because these articles were finally going to bring peace to the Middle East.

Okay, the man had a dose of ‘Jerusalem syndrome’. It was a well-known psychological condition often afflicting tourists, particularly men, who got too close to the holy places. In this case, however, there would be no lasting psychopathology. He would not claim to be the Messiah. He would not deliver a sermon at the Wailing Wall, nor wear a toga down the Via Dolorosa. He would simply get off his bed after about five minutes and make a cup of tea.

And then he would travel throughout Israel and the Occupied Territories writing other features for his new masters in Hong Kong—as well as papers in Australia and America—on the turmoil in the West Bank, on the ructions within the national unity government, on the battle over sacred sites in the Old City, on the rescue of Jews from Ethiopia, on the merits of the Baha’i faith, on the dispossession of the Bedouin, on the ancient techniques of desert agriculture, on the growing power of religious Jews and on the allegations of torture and perjury within the country’s internal intelligence organisation, Shin Bet.

And then, together with the woman he loved, he would venture into one of the most heavily populated and miserable places on earth, in order to write the story he’d been threatening to write ever since arriving in Israel six months earlier.

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*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip—Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza!*

Acts 8:26

The Gaza Strip is not a pretty place, and back in 1987 the signs of its infirmity were everywhere. Wedged between Egypt and Israel, on Israel's south-western flank, it was a teeming corral of 500,000 disaffected and angry souls, almost half of whom were living in eight squalid refugee camps scattered throughout the territory.

In October, a few weeks after Merran's return, we decided to go there on assignment, with Merran taking the photographs and me doing the interviews and writing the story. We would drive the 100 kilometres south-west from Jerusalem to Gaza in my new Swiss Lancia, passing through the Erez Crossing separating the Strip from Israel. In Gaza I would talk to Palestinian activists, lawyers, members of the Red Crescent Society and refugees inside Jabalaya, the largest of the eight refugee camps.

There was only one problem. I forgot to listen to the military radio before leaving. Had I done so, I would have known that tensions were still boiling over the death of three Palestinians at a roadblock two weeks earlier. I would also have known that a large protest designed to shut down the Gaza Strip was scheduled for that very day.

We didn't know trouble was coming until it actually arrived, and that was just minutes after we'd seen the sign that said Welcome to Gaza, and we'd turned into Omar al-Mukhtar Street, the main thoroughfare running from Palestine Square to

Port Gaza on the Mediterranean. We were looking for the office of the Palestinian lawyer whom I was scheduled to interview.

Within seconds I realised my mistake. All the shops were shut and the eyes of the street were upon us. Hundreds of people were now staring at my very shiny new Swiss car with Israeli numberplates and two people inside who looked very much like Israelis.

'Oh fuck,' I said, as much to myself as to Merran.

'What do you mean?' she replied. 'The cultural difference?' She thought I was responding with alarm to the way the Arabs looked, compared to the Jews of West Jerusalem.

'No,' I said, terror suddenly taking hold. 'No one is doing anything and everyone is looking at us.'

And that was when the first brick came flying through the front windscreen, missing my head by centimetres. The second brick broke the driver's window, landing at my feet, showering glass on my hands and legs. The third shattered the pane on Merran's side, missing her head by a whisker. Then came a volley of rocks and stones and suddenly we were without windows, surrounded on all sides.

The car began to idle in second gear. We were just about to stall when I jammed it into first and tore out of there, tyres screeching, nearly knocking down two demonstrators in the process. It was over in seconds.

'Are you alright?' I cried, as we headed towards the sea.

'Yes,' Merran replied. 'I'm fine.'

*Fine? We were nearly bloody killed. What on earth was I thinking coming here without a Palestinian guide?*

We went to the Israeli military headquarters at the western end of Omar al-Mukhtar street and reported what had just happened (we did this for insurance purposes, not to bring retribution on the population). Then I called the Palestinian lawyer whom I was supposed to have met half an hour earlier and he came to collect us, apologising profusely on behalf of his people as he drove us back to his office.

'Did you have a sign on your car saying you are a journalist?' he asked.

'No,' I replied, ashamed of my own stupidity.

'This is necessary, my friend,' he said. 'Especially today. Today you drive into demonstration because of killings.'

'What killings?'

'You did not hear? The Israelis shot four Palestinians yesterday. This is a demonstration for the killing.'

We then went from the Palestinian lawyer's office to the office of the Gaza Red Crescent Society, and on to the Jabalaya refugee camp. To me, a child of Zionists, raised on the comforting images of suntanned Jewish pioneers reclaiming their ancient birthright, treating their Arab cousins with a democratising benevolence, this was as confronting a sight as I had ever seen—as many as 100,000 Palestinians living under the most appalling conditions in an area of no more than 1.5 square kilometres. This was Israel's Soweto, and definitely not what my Jewish upbringing had taught me.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in Jabalaya and at dusk returned in our windowless car to Jerusalem, where I went straight to my desk to write what I believe was the first story of the uprising to come.

On 6 December, an Israeli businessman was stabbed to death while shopping in Gaza, and two days after this four Palestinians—three from Jabalaya—were killed in a ‘traffic accident’ when an Israeli army tank transporter crashed into a row of cars.

So incensed were Palestinians at what they saw as a deliberate act of revenge for the stabbing that on 9 December Jabalaya erupted, triggering a chain reaction of violent protests throughout the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem. An entire nation was now rising up in a spontaneous act of revolt. The first uprising, or intifada, was to last for six years.

Two months before these events my story was published in the *South China Morning Post* with the headline: Flames of Anger Roar in Gaza. It made me look like the right man for the right story at the right moment. I knew better. I knew it had been pure fluke on my part, in concert with breathtaking naivety.

I was deeply troubled by having gone with Merran into Gaza without having first observed the proper precautions. In my defence, I could claim that the demonstration was the first of its kind against Israeli occupation; until that point in the history of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, no Israeli cars had been attacked in the Occupied Territories.

This was no defence at all. I’d set out for Gaza because it seemed from various reports—although not the ones I failed to listen to on the day of the attack—that the place was about to explode. Here was a desperate people living in squalor and without hope, denied access to basic health and education, detained without trial, family members deported, homes demolished and no rights to union membership or fair wages. There was obviously going to be a tipping point, and this had been it.

After finishing my 3000-word article I took a long bath, and as I sank into the warm water I began shaking uncontrollably. For at least an hour I lay there shivering and obsessing over what might have happened, imagining Merran injured, or worse, if one of those bricks had hit her in the head and/or the car had stalled. I believed the crowd would have pulled us from our car and beaten us to death—just like they were to do in the ensuing months and years when other cars strayed into the wrong area at the wrong time.

Merran thought I was being overly dramatic. She thought that to say we could have been killed was to say we could have been flattened by the truck that roared past us seconds after we'd stepped onto a kerb. Or that, had we still been leaning against the tree when lightning struck, we'd have been toast. We'd been in trouble, yes. The crowd had been angry, yes. It was a close shave with those bricks and rocks and stones, yes. But it was over in seconds. We'd got away. End of story.

For years afterwards nothing I said would ever convince her that my reading of what happened that day was right—that as probably the first Israeli car to drive into the Gaza Strip on the eve of the first Palestinian uprising, we were in mortal danger—not just because of who we were (or who we were presumed to be), but because of where we were and when we happened to be there. It was about timing, and our timing had been disastrous.

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Two weeks after Gaza I asked Merran to marry me. I had taken to heart the story of Father Lazarus's twenty-seven years in the desert because of love's misfortune. I had absorbed the tragedy of Merran's sister Jill, whose partner John had dropped dead a

few years earlier in London from a cerebral haemorrhage. Jill had never been truly honoured as his widow because they'd never formalised their union with a wedding.

Our near escape had me thinking about my love for this doctor's daughter from Hunters Hill, and how, if one of us had been killed that day, I would have wanted to have been her husband, not her boyfriend, and for her to have been my wife. That sounds like the reasonings of a Jewish catastrophist, but in those weeks with Merran in Israel, which had turned into months, something new had claimed us both; something beyond the love and the longing, which had to do with the writing of a shared mythology, a shared history, here in the Holy Land. I wanted to walk through this world with her.

A few weeks after Gaza we drove in my newly repaired car to Taba, the resort town at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, where the desert meets Egypt's Red Sea Riviera. Today Taba is a border crossing between Israel and Egypt, but in 1987 it was the cause of a major international dispute—a 600-metre sliver of shingle and sand coveted by both countries but controlled by Israel.

Israel had built a \$US 20 million hotel on the shores of the Red Sea and, together with the nearby Bedouin camp and the End of the World nightclub, it was one of the most popular tourist destinations in the region for both Israelis and Europeans.

Such were the delightful distractions of Taba that you could sit on the verandah at the Sonesta hotel, the translucent waters of the Red Sea and the mountains of Jordan and Saudi Arabia shimmering beyond, and completely ignore the fact that this was a no-man's-land of bitter contention between two frontline states. (Two years after our visit, Taba was returned to Egypt and seventeen years

after this the Sonesta hotel was blown up in a car-bomb attack by an Al-Qaeda affiliate. Thirty-one people died and another 159 were injured as ten floors of the hotel collapsed.)

'Would you marry me?' I asked Merran one evening as she sat on my lap.

'Of course I would,' she replied, as if the question were absurd.

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Did you think I would ask you?'

'I hoped you would.'

When she'd said yes a third time we went back into the room to seal our pact and activate our oxytocin receptors in the time-honoured way of lovers, and then called our families to tell them the news, despite Merran's suggestion that we wait till morning.

'Why would we do that?' I asked.

'To be sure. To sleep on it. You might change your mind,' she said.

'No way ... let's call them. It'll be fine in the morning.'

So we did—just to make sure that there'd be no backsliding. If I was going to take this giant leap of faith into wedlock, it would have to be seized without hesitation down here in the Sinai Desert.

'Hello, Mum ... it's us. We're here overlooking the Jordan River. I just thought you'd like to know we're getting married. Yes. We just decided. We wanted you to know. Thank you, yes. I know, it's great, isn't it? Are you surprised? Really? Happy? Oh, that's great. Is Dad there? Hi, Dad, I just wanted you to know we're getting

married. Yes, we decided a little while ago. I don't know. Possibly March next year when I'm back. Yes, we are too ... over the moon.'

Merran's father Jim had died when Merran was twenty-three. We called her mother, Jeanne. 'Hi, Jeanne, it's David here in Israel. I just wanted you to know that Merran and I have decided to get married.'

There was a long pause.

'Aren't you going to ask my permission?' she replied, only half joking.

'Yes, of course. Sorry, Jeanne. Would you mind if I married your daughter?'

'Not at all,' she said. 'I would be delighted.'

And with that my Middle Eastern stint was over, ten months after it began. I was taking the left fork home instead of the road less travelled.

## CARD GAMES

On 31 March 1988, Merran and I were married in the grounds of a sandstone manor in Sydney in front of one hundred and seventy people. Merran was a picture of loveliness in raw-silk damask pants and a body-hugging taffeta dress split to the waist. She looked like an Indian princess as she glided towards me to the sound of Sting's 'Fragile', a song that captured for both of us the perishable nature of life and love.

I wore a white suit and purple tie and looked like the proverbial cat that had swallowed the cream. I still had hair.

It was an evening—as Paul Simon might have said—of miracle and wonder. Kathryn Selby, the Australian classical pianist, played Debussy's *L'isle Joyeuse*; a swing band had us dancing to Duke Ellington and Tommy Dorsey numbers till 1 am; and in the garden Merran's 'Torch Brothers' created a beautifully choreographed fireworks display that rained happiness on our heads.

The period leading up to our wedding had been difficult. In January, I'd gone to see my grandmother, Hansey Simblist, to inform her that Merran would not be converting to Judaism as we'd originally planned.

Merran had grown up in a Presbyterian family, but for most of her adult life her sympathies had lain with Buddhism, although her curiosities extended beyond Buddhism to other faiths, like Judaism and Baha'ism. It was this curiosity about other faiths, coupled with her love for me and my Jewishness, that had made it possible for her to contemplate something I'm not sure I could ever have done—convert to

the faith of my spouse. She was doing this for no other reason than to make me happy.

We'd begun Jewish conversion classes at the liberal-minded Temple Emanuel synagogue, but after three excruciatingly difficult forays into Jewish studies and the Hebrew language it had become clear to me that if we were to continue this together, we would both end up being far more Jewish than I'd imagined. I didn't even know how much I really wanted Merran to be Jewish, or why. According to Jewish law, it would mean that our children would be Jewish and this would make my parents and grandmother happy. But to arrive at that place required so much study on Merran's part that I was not prepared to make her go through it, so I pulled the plug on our classes and announced this to my parents before going to confront my grandmother on the subject. This was never going to be an easy conversation because—unbeknown to Merran—my grandmother's affection for her had largely been predicated on her becoming Jewish. Obviously, she had still not learnt from the tragic consequences of her opposition to her second daughter's marriage.

It was the eve of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, and as my grandmother and I sipped tea served to us by her Scottish housekeeper, she reached into her purse to present me with a twenty-dollar note for the new year.

'Nan,' I said to her, 'I just need to tell you ... I hope you'll understand ... that Merran is not going to convert after all. It was my decision, not hers, but I felt after the three classes we did that she'd end up being more Jewish than I've ever been, and it didn't feel right.'

My grandmother stuffed the twenty dollars back into her purse, snapped it shut, then looked at me with sad, reproachful eyes and said, ‘I see, dear. Very well then.’

That scene had been wrenching but not catastrophic. Catastrophic was two months before our wedding day, when Merran’s house in Rozelle, in Sydney’s inner west, burnt to the ground. I’d been living there since my return from Israel in January. One night we went out for dinner with my parents and returned later that evening to find the street cordoned off and firefighters dousing the last of the flames that had devoured her weatherboard cottage. Apparently, we’d left the halogen lamp on too close to the back of the couch and, given that the couch was made of a highly flammable polyurethane foam, the whole thing had gradually overheated before igniting into a fireball.

Our friend and flatmate Susan Biggs, soon to be one of Merran’s three bridesmaids, was on the phone when she heard crackling in the living room. She knew we weren’t home but she ran upstairs to our empty bedroom screaming for us to get out of bed, disoriented—she realised later—by all the retardant chemicals. Susan only narrowly escaped herself before the flames licked the living room ceiling and stairwell, causing the phone to melt into the table. Everything Merran owned—furniture, clothes, books and photos—was reduced to cinders.

That was the beginning of our life together after Israel—a house of ashes and a white wedding that brought together an upper middle-class Jewish family of European roots and a fifth-generation Presbyterian family from Hunters Hill in Sydney.

At the beginning of 1988 I returned to the *Australian* as a feature writer for the soon-to-be-launched weekend magazine. Merran had taken a job with the Crafts Council of New South Wales and, with the insurance money from her house and some much needed help from my father, we were able to buy a terrace in Darlinghurst, across the road from where junked-out hookers and transsexuals plied their unhappy trade.

In January the following year we discovered Merran was pregnant. She was late in her cycle and had just handed me the home pregnancy test from the bathroom when I asked her, 'What colour does the stick go if you're pregnant?' 'Pink,' she said.

'It's so pink it's purple,' I replied.

Merran came rushing from the bathroom and burst into tears. I grabbed the banister to steady myself. Only four weeks earlier she'd said to me, 'Let's try to have a child in about a year.'

*A year? You can't be serious, I'd thought. We only got married last March. I'm still getting used to being a husband. That will take at least another three years. And surely we'll want time to enjoy ourselves. Alone. How would we travel? How would we go out on Saturday nights? What would happen to Sunday mornings in bed? And, for that matter, Mondays, Tuesdays ...*

These, of course, were peripheral questions. The real question was: how could I, who at times considered myself too free-spirited even to be married, become a parent? I was too selfish. The idea seemed preposterous, the risks for the child too high.

Naturally I needed to consider Merran's biological clock. According to the one-year-from-now plan she would be thirty-four by the time our first child arrived, about thirty-six for our second. The timekeeper was saying, 'Do it soon!' but the pit of my stomach was saying, 'No, wait.' I needed an accident—and that's what we got.

Somehow, life conspired at this time to give us a sabbatical in paradise. Twelve months after starting with the *Australian Magazine* I resigned to pursue freelance writing, while Merran completed her contract as an arts consultant. The timing was perfect for a working holiday. I had commissions for two months in the United States and, after that, the offer of a friend's cottage in Greece for as long as we wanted. 'Come, make babies,' the friend had said warmly.

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The island of Cephalonia is not a bad place for procreation, even if you've already accomplished that. The Ionian Sea wraps around the setting of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* like a turquoise quilt and the fir tree-covered mountains loom from behind every whitewashed wall.

Our cottage sat in a garden of daffodils and poppies on the side of a hill, and each day we would wake to the tinkling of goat bells as the local shepherd, a dashing Greek god-like figure, guided his flock up and down the rocky incline. For six weeks we heard from virtually no one else.

One brisk early morning we hired a car in order to see the island. We took the mountain road and on that treacherous strip of tar, with its sheer vertical drop into the limestone sea and no safety fence, I had a very long look at mortality.

I had feared death two years earlier in the Gaza Strip, but this was the first time I had been scared of dying because of someone else.

On the one hand, there I was in an open jeep with the woman I loved—part of a blissed-out family-in-the-making. On the other hand there was this yawning drop into the sea, barely two metres away.

There is no way you can look into an abyss and not thank the gods you're alive and that your brakes are working. There is no way you can ignore the fact that there are three people in a car on a mountain road, not two. You just don't know the third person yet.

This was the moment that the swell of Merran's stomach became the object of my unconditional love. This was where the notion of fatherhood really began to take hold and a selfish life began to make way for a wonderfully old-fashioned—and much better—idea: that somebody else might matter more than myself. And this was where, not long after this mountain drive, I began writing a letter to my unborn child:

*I wanted to photograph your mother's face this afternoon, there in the field surrounded by yellow and purple flowers, or else in the front of the house where pink oleanders matched the colour of her shirt.*

*I am only now beginning to see how perfectly suited I am to a life with her. She is the only woman I have ever really imagined being my wife, and your mother. She is the only woman I have ever known who is as strong as she is gentle, who laughs as hard as she cries, who bestows on others a rich but subtle nourishment and wisdom.*

*I have felt this since we met, but in the first year after our wedding it was sometimes dimmed by my own forebodings. She, too, wrestled with the constraints of marriage. Believe me, there were times when she wept and wept and there was*

*nothing I or anybody could do. She was weeping for a life passing and for a new one that imposed on her demands which anyone who cherished their own freedom would find daunting. It had nothing to do with love. It was just that thing called marriage.*

*You must understand that, certainly in the age in which we lived, in the age we now live, it was not, nor was it ever going to be, a simple matter for two people like your mother and I to marry. Marriage was the great compromise; children the ultimate shackle. At least, that's what we thought until we found one another and decided, independently, that we were each worth the risk.*

*I know I love you already without having seen you, and yet I shudder at my own incompetence, at the failings I hope never to pass on to you but which you will inevitably be touched by.*

*I have no answers, only questions.*

*I sit here at my desk and ask myself: how can I father a child in an age such as this? What kind of world will I bequeath to you? What will your judgement be? And when you've judged the world, how will you then judge the people who brought you into it? Will we be friends, like my father and I? Will we understand one another, or will you turn around in ten years' time and say, 'Dad, you're fucked.' And will my father—your grandfather—stand behind me and laugh, and urge you on, because in life's great cycle it's now my turn to get from you what I gave to him?*

*You see, I have no answers. Only questions.*

I think our daughter was fifteen when she read this letter for the first time. 'That's nice, Dad,' she said.

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We returned to Sydney and went almost straight from the airport to our birth class. This was not just any birth class; this was the New Age variety, replete with beanbags, ambient music, chamomile tea and two beaming instructors whom I shall call Brad and Janet.

Within minutes of our arrival Brad was instructing us in communication through massage. With a gentle voice and a clear set of instructions he showed us how to relate to one another through touch—how to ‘feel at one’ with our partner and, for us men, how to imagine there was a real person inside the woman next to us. That’s right: ‘a baybeee’.

For me, it was time to leave, but Merran insisted we give the class longer than fifteen minutes. I agreed, reluctantly.

Brad wasn’t finished, though. He next went down on all fours, holding a plastic doll called Matilda to his crutch. He started pelvic rocking with Matilda firmly in hand. Matilda’s head then started crowning and, *bingo*, within seconds the doll was born, straight from Brad’s jeans.

Brad was then standing up. Squatting. Bending forward over the cushions. Brad was doing impossible things and Matilda was presenting as posterior, anterior, breech. You name it, Brad was doing it. This was truly an act of God—but it was the first and last New Age birth class we went to.

As it turned out our child was breech and no amount of exercise or cajoling seemed to budge it from its preferred buttocks-first-into-the-world direction. We sang. We talked. We rubbed. Nothing.

Someone had told us an old wives' tale about why infants went into a breech position. It was because the parents expected the baby to be one sex over another. In protest, the baby presented its genitals first instead of its head.

It wasn't that we preferred a boy to a girl. It was just that all those people who claimed to have special intuition about these things said categorically: 'It's a boy.' And when friends, family and Greek peasant women tell you with such certitude that you are going to have a son you start believing them.

So we waited for this son of ours to come. We had been told that 4 September was the due date. At 11 am on 19 September, after inspecting the CTG results, the obstetrician told us to 'go home, have some lunch and then come back and have a baby'.

And that's what we did. We went home, had lunch and then returned to the hospital for the birth of our first child.

Even now, as I write this, I can hear the screams. They are bloodcurdling—as though we are on a battlefield and Merran's leg is being amputated. She is having an episiotomy and I am helpless in the face of this. This is my first experience of the everyday miracle of birth.

*It's 11.30 pm. A minute ago it was two o'clock. Give her the gas. She wants the gas. Where's the doctor? She wants to push. Why won't you let her push? Okay, not fully dilated yet. Come on, we're nearly there. Here's the doctor. Why does he look so calm? Look at the pain she is in! Please don't scream. Okay, scream. Scream as hard as you want. Yes, he says you can push. The bottom's showing. Goddamn it, that's my child's bottom. Push. That's right, the bottom is coming. Please don't scream. Darling, he's telling you to feel the bottom. You don't want to? Okay. You do*

*want to? Okay. The doctor wants to cut. Jesus, he's cutting. That's right, push, push, PUSH. Here it comes. The trunk is coming. My God, it's blue. No it's not, it's white. The head's still inside. The head's coming. It's out. It's bloody. It's a baby. Look at this! My God, here it is. We've done it! You've done it! We've got a baby! What is it? I forgot to ask.*

It was a girl, not a boy. A girl. Jordan, our first daughter. The name was bound to cause a stir, especially on my side of the family.

'Are you really going to call her Jordan?' my grandmother asked me straight after the birth.

'Yes, Nan.'

'Well, let's hope she brings peace to the Middle East.'

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In the year of Jordan's birth I wrote two of my first stories for *Good Weekend*, stories that would change my thinking, and my journalistic compass, forever. When I'd returned from Jerusalem at the beginning of 1988, I'd become despondent at the thought of ever finding a subject as gripping as the Middle East conflict.

For me, the Middle East still had everything. The desert and the souk, the Hindu Kush, Fertile Crescent and the Garden of Eden. It was the stories of the Bible and the traumatised aftermath of the Holocaust. It was where the forces of colonialism, Pan-Arabism, Zionism and Islamic fundamentalism converged. It was where some of the worst features of the Cold War had been fought out between superpower patrons and their client states. It was where Jew confronted Muslim, Arab confronted Israeli, Persian confronted Arab, Afghani confronted Persian, Kurd confronted Turk, Shia confronted Sunni, Lebanese Christian confronted Lebanese

Muslim, Sephardic Jew confronted Ashkenazi Jew, and where thousands of other tribes and clans confronted one another: Uzbeki, Hazara, Turkmen, Pashtun, Baluchi.

It was where the Bedouin roamed, and from where refugees still fled, across borders and oceans to countries like ours. It was the birthplace of some of the great advances in mathematics, architecture, literature and science, and it was also the birthplace of the assassin, the Fedayeen and the suicide bomber. It was the place that had appalled, intoxicated and confounded people for centuries and, for many years, me too.

And here I was returning to Australia to write about what? The re-enactment of the First Fleet voyage? The World Expo in Brisbane? A newly deregulated economy?

Towards the end of Australia's bicentennial year I answered my own question after being commissioned to write two profiles on two people I thought worthy of feature-length articles. The first was A.D. Hope, the grand patriarch of Australian poetry; the second, Petrea King, a woman who had counselled thousands of Australians with life-threatening illnesses.

It was ten years since I'd read the confessional poems and sonnets of the American poet Robert Lowell at university, and over the years I'd also penned a few passable poems and lyrics myself. I was a stranger to the more subterranean conversations that took place in the poetic imagination, but I can see now how just reading poetry was an act of deep contemplation. It was a questing after different truths, an attempt at a conversation with some part of yourself that didn't take place in everyday life.

I met Professor Alec Hope at his Canberra home in December 1988. He was eighty-one years old and had just finished his first comic play, while also translating three other poets into English. Hope read eleven languages, including Old Icelandic, and had been awarded an OBE, a Companion of the Order of Australia, as well as numerous other prizes for his contribution to Australian literature.

He had started early. At the age of eight he'd written a fifty-two-stanza poem for his mother on the virtues of Christianity, and by the time he was nine was so well acquainted with the works of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats and Shelley that he likened them to 'familiar friends'. At ten he'd devoured Milton and confronted Byron and, by the age of twelve, had written a novel. At fourteen, his first poems were published, but it was not until he was forty-eight that his work was first published in book form.

The poet's torch had been passed to him more than twenty years earlier, around 1932, by another great Australian of the European tradition, Christopher Brennan. Their encounter one day in the toilet of the Mansions Hotel in Kings Cross was as bizarre as it was brief.

Hope was standing in a cubicle one afternoon when Brennan appeared beside him. Hope tried to engage the ageing drunkard in dialogue, but when this proved futile, he pulled out a felt pen and began writing on the toilet wall. It was an inscription from the fortifications of ancient Pompeii: FUTUITUR CUNNUS PILOSSUS (the hairy cunt) ...

Brennan took the pencil out of Hope's hand and finished the quotation: MULTO MELIUS QUAM GLABER (fucks much better than the plucked one).

'He didn't talk about the contents at all,' Hope told me. 'He gave a fascinating short talk about the metre. He said, "You know, it's a septenary, of course." His talk only lasted five or six minutes. And he slumped away again and I had my pee and came back to find him ... collapsed. That was the only time I met him.'

I was nervous about meeting Alec Hope because of his reputation for verbal savagery. After reviewing Max Harris's first novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, Hope had written that Harris was 'morally sick', and couldn't write. (Harris told me later that Hope had gone in for the kill—almost like 'shooting baby rabbits in their burrows'.)

He'd given Patrick White a mugging too, for which White was never to forgive him. Hope wrote that arguably Australia's greatest author had three disastrous faults as a novelist. 'He knows too much, he tells too much and he talks too much.' White's novel *The Tree of Man*, Hope wrote, was 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge'.

David Martin's selected poems had also copped a hiding, with Hope describing them as 'crude and debased art', while Mary Gilmore's verse was likened to 'a daily batch of scones'.

When I arrived at Alec Hope's house the front door was open and the old man was shuffling down the hallway to greet me with a notebook of unpublished poems in his hand. We would end up talking at the dining table for hours over a half-flagon of red wine, with the late-afternoon shadows dancing in the window and his 120-year-old cat, Abyssinia, brushing past our legs. We talked about other poets and about poetry and about the role of dreams in poetry until, finally, I asked him whether he was scared of dying.

He responded with a story about Jonathan Swift who, in his old age, pointed to a tree that was beginning to go brown at the top. ‘I shall be like that tree,’ Swift said. ‘I shall begin to die at the top.’

‘And so he did,’ Hope told me. ‘He went mad and he knew he was going mad and that is something that one has a horror of. I am pleased that my legs give way and the top end seems to be all right so far.’

And then, in a moment akin to Bob Dylan pulling out his Martin guitar and singing ‘Not Dark Yet’ for you, Professor Hope opened his notebook, cleared his throat, and with a slightly slurred but resonant voice, read me one of the last poems he would ever write.

It was called ‘Card Games’.

*Club, diamond, heart and spade*

*Under these the game is played*

*Warfare, wealth, love and death*

*Dominate our every breath*

*Players are not free to choose*

*Suit assigned nor hand refuse*

*Dealt them careless of their skill*

*Shuffled blindly, well or ill*

*Wealth I had no talent for*

*Lacked all aptitude for war*

*Death at most might set me free*

*Hearts were always trumps to me*

Looking back on that meeting with Alec Hope twenty-five years ago, I can see now I was trying to open my eyes and ears to new lines of inquiry, hoping that journalism could help me answer some of those questions.

Many of us embark on unconscious pilgrimages to places without really understanding why. We gravitate to wells, churches and battlefields, to caves and ceremonial sites, because they speak to parts of ourselves that are longing to connect to something bigger, to fables, myths or songlines, to mystical traditions of which we might have only the barest understanding, but are drawn to nonetheless. Our brains are firing us to *know*, but our souls are demanding that we *feel* something.

A.D. Hope's line 'Hearts were always trumps to me' spoke to my own predisposition. As a teenager I had looked for ways to voice these things, but my own poetry and feckless love songs were no substitute for the masters themselves—Lennon and McCartney, Dylan, Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen and Bruce Springsteen, men who were able to write about their hungry hearts without wincing.

In 1977 I'd actually gone looking for Leonard Cohen on the Greek island of Hydra. Cohen had owned a house there since 1960 and written songs like 'Bird on a Wire' in his cottage overlooking the Aegean. He also met Marianne there, the woman who was to inspire one of his most unforgettable paeans to the allure of women, 'So Long Marianne'.

I arrived in Hydra with my backpack and acoustic guitar and set off in search of my hero, believing—for some reason that still eludes me—that Cohen would be pleased to meet me.

'Yassou, kali mera,' I called out to the farmers and goatherds I passed on the winding coastal road leading out of town. 'Do you speak English? Do you know

where Leonard Cohen lives?' No, they didn't speak English and if they understood my request, they weren't about to reveal the whereabouts of the Canadian poet and songwriter. After walking about ten kilometres without sighting my man, I did what any self-respecting Cohen acolyte would have done. I sat on a rock with a view of the cliffs of Hydra, took out my guitar and sang 'Suzanne', hoping that Cohen might appear. He didn't.

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Petrea King was the second person to help guide me into these long-cordoned-off places of the heart. I profiled her for *Good Weekend* shortly after interviewing A.D. Hope, but her influence would prove far greater than that of the genius poet.

Six years before our meeting, Petrea had been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia and told by her doctors that she 'wouldn't see Christmas'. She was offered chemotherapy that would neither cure her nor give her a remission, but might extend her life by a few weeks. That was September 1983 and she was thirty-three years old.

Petrea had been studying yoga and meditation in America when she was diagnosed, and once she was back home with her young children she made plans to die. 'I wept buckets,' she told me at our first meeting. 'I knew that if I had died my father would have gone on at length about my accomplishments, but inside I still wouldn't have known who I was. I didn't have any peace. I still didn't have any kind of resolution about the events of my life, and I think that was the hard part.'

Petrea had worked as a roustabout in New Zealand and a boundary rider in western Queensland, then with Winston Churchill's family in Sussex as a nanny,

during which time she catalogued his library and letters. But she had also known great suffering.

At the age of twelve she'd spent nearly three years in hospital because her knees rotated inward so severely that they kept dislocating. Her first sexual experience had been at seventeen when she was raped by a friend at a church fellowship meeting while she was in a back brace. In her early twenties she'd become so crippled by arthritis she could only walk with crutches. In 1982 one of her beloved brothers took his life and then, eighteen months later, she was given her own death sentence.

Petrea felt she hadn't lived yet, and this was what she applied herself to when she was diagnosed.

'It wasn't so much doing anything to stop myself from dying,' she told me. 'It was just trying to find some peace before I did. I fully expected to die. I packed my internal bags. My children were only four and seven and they went to live with their father.'

'I moved in with my parents and they looked after me, and then I went to Italy. I literally had all my life packed up in this little suitcase.'

Petrea made her way to a place she had always dreamt of visiting: Assisi, in the hills of Umbria. She was taken in by a monastery a few kilometres outside the city where St Francis had isolated himself in prayer and contemplation. There, in a cave built into the rock face on the slopes of Mount Subasio, Petrea followed St Francis's example, meditating and praying for up to eighteen hours a day.

And she found peace. When she returned to Australia she was told she was in remission but that it was unlikely to last. She had no conscious plan to work with

people with life-threatening illnesses, but having trained as a naturopath and with some nursing in her background, there seemed to be an inevitability about this new calling: to work with the sick and dying.

Within weeks of beginning her new practice, people with cancer and AIDS began seeking her out. She came alive in their presence. She understood many of the issues they faced. They needed to talk and cry and rail and scream. They needed, after the doctor's diagnosis, to be treated as human beings with their own unique stories, personal histories and futures. They needed advice on exercise and diet and meditation and various other ways of addressing the discord in their lives. Many people, having been told they were going to die, discovered how to live properly for the first time. And to love. 'I have arranged my public schedule so that I can kill myself in November,' a leading Australian conductor told Petrea several years before his death in 1991 from an AIDS-related illness. 'But I'll be damned if I will die before I've learnt how to love.'

This man was a gifted artist, comfortable on the world's stages, a man at his best when expressing himself through his music. It was the only way he was able to truly give voice to his emotions because he didn't feel safe speaking of what was truly in his heart. Before he died, Petrea helped him find the profound peace he'd been aching for. She was to end up doing this with more than 100,000 Australians over the succeeding years—not just people diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses, but also people who had suffered a crisis of hope or purpose; who, in some cases, had been crucified publicly in the media, or had feared some dark secret being made public. Some were prepared to take their own lives rather than see this happen. Petrea counselled them all.

Her reputation spread. At one point she was seeing an average of 200 people a week in her lounge room in Crow's Nest—young, old, nearly dead, the not-yet-ready-to-die. When I first met her, a woman had just telephoned to ask for an appointment. Petrea told the woman she couldn't see her for three weeks.

'But the doctors have only given me four,' the woman said.

'All right,' Petrea replied. 'I'll see you on Saturday morning.'

Her first teacher in this magnificent vocation had been a nine-year-old boy called Charlie who had died three years earlier from cancer. Petrea had been invited into Charlie's home to see if there was something, *anything*, she could do for his family, as they were falling apart.

'I think this was a major turning point in my life,' she told me. 'I witnessed that while Charlie had his hand held and his brow stroked, he was never actually cuddled anymore because of the tubes and the pain. So we sat him forward in bed and I straddled the bed behind him, and from then until the day he died a couple of weeks later, twenty-four hours a day, he lay in the arms of people who loved him.'

'I used to sit in bed with him at night so his family could sleep and he had a nurse as well, and then the family used to take turns during the day. So instead of his mother disappearing to draw up the morphine and his father disappearing because he couldn't stand feeling so helpless in the presence of his beloved son in so much pain, the brother and sister not knowing what to do and disappearing, and Charlie going down with his pain, we found tools and skills so we could work through that hellish situation together.'

'I used to hold both his hands and look into his eyes and we would breathe through the pain. It didn't change it. It didn't make it go away, but we were able to participate in it and that was very, very valuable.'

'His father had been very resistant to being in bed with his son because it was so hard to be so close to so much pain without escape. Yet, finally, he got in the bed. Just to see him hold and stroke his sleeping son, weeping, it was very painful, but it got to the very essence of what being human was about, a willingness to simply be present to the whole agony and richness of life.'

Petrea King's approach to life was a form of investigative vulnerability—a way of probing the essence of what it meant to be human. This was one of the reasons I joined her Quest For Life Foundation soon after writing my article. I had grown to love her, and I wanted her as my friend.

In her presence it was enough to be who we were, not who we were pretending to be. In fact, it was of urgent, life-affirming importance that we do so. And, conversely, it was important that we all stopped being who we were not in order that we might live more meaningful, authentic, integrated lives—*before* a medical diagnosis forced us to take stock and look at all our misdirected priorities or unresolved issues.

'Ask yourself,' Petrea once said to me, 'not whether you're good at your job, but whether your job is good for you.'

## THE JOURNALIST AND THE MURDERER

In 1989, after a year of freelancing, I joined the staff of a new bimonthly magazine, *HQ*, and for the first time in my working life—notwithstanding the Southern embrace of New Orleans—I began to feel as though I was surrounded by true allies.

With the exception of art director Bruce Daley, my new colleagues were all women. Shona Martyn, the red-headed dynamo from New Zealand with the warm bustling personality and the razor-sharp intelligence, was the founding editor, fresh from a five-year stint at the helm of *Good Weekend*. Fenella Souter, her deputy, was the as yet undiscovered Dorothy Parker of Australian journalism—a woman of penetrating brainpower, the stillness of a Zen monk and a withering, uproarious turn of phrase. She would later become editor of both *HQ* and *Good Weekend* and, eventually, executive editor of *Marie Claire*, while also proving herself one of the best feature writers in the country, not to mention one of my dearest friends.

At *HQ* Roz Gatwood was the chief sub-editor and resident guardian of the Queen's English. She knew nothing about popular culture post-1970, but everything about the classics and how a sentence could be consistent, clear and rhythmic. If there was a spelling mistake, grammatical error or structural incongruity within a story, Roz's scrupulous eye would detect it. She was a one-woman editorial surveillance system.

Together these three women, along with the irrepressible Susan Skelly and, later, Jane Wheatley and Amruta Slee, comprised, at the time, arguably the best editorial magazine team ever assembled in Australia. No subject was taboo. No lines

of inquiry were ever left unexplored. No ‘facts’ were ever left unchecked. No story was ever good enough, until it was.

There was no publication like it, no forum more contemporary, intelligent, irreverent, provocative and committed to in-depth journalism than *HQ*. It was Australia’s answer to *Vanity Fair* (minus the bumper advertisements) and for nearly five years I had the privilege of being its feature writer, although one day the owner of the magazine, Kerry Packer, made me doubt this privilege.

‘Hello, Kerry,’ my father said to the Big Man when we bumped into him one morning at the southern end of Palm Beach. Standing on the shoreline in his swimming togs, Packer was a formidable sight.

‘Hello, Bernie, how are you?’

‘I’m fine, Kerry, thanks. Have you met my son David? I’m not sure if you know, but he happens to be working for you.’

‘Is that right?’ Packer said. ‘And where would that be?’

‘*HQ* magazine,’ I replied.

Packer looked at me as though I was recovering from a lobotomy. ‘Well, I don’t think much of it,’ he said, turning back to my father. They were the only words we ever exchanged.

It took me a few months to adjust to the *HQ* experiment. I was not used to the meticulous scrutiny, the hands-on editing, the intense collaboration. And so, in the early stages, I agitated.

‘What’s wrong with the way that sentence reads?’ I demanded angrily of Roz Gatwood one day.

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ she replied, too evenly for my liking.

'How doesn't it make sense?' I blustered.

'You can't use a verb like that because it's a transitive verb and it has to take an object. And by the way, the phrase "inverse proportion" can't be used like that either because the situation you're describing is directly proportional, not of inverse proportion.'

'Oh bullshit, Roz.'

Roz had an instinct for language that I'd never encountered before. In another place and time she might have been James Joyce's literary editor. Sometimes, however, she went too far. On one memorable occasion she had the temerity to delete the opening line of my story. She thought it was overwritten, too flowery. She said she'd been planning to break the news to me at a later, more opportune moment, but I'd pre-empted her by stumbling across the laid-out pages in the art department MINUS THE LEAD I'D LABOURED OVER FOR HOURS.

'What the hell are you doing, Roz?' I demanded, storming over to her desk.

'David, I think the lead is better like that,' she replied, again with infuriating equanimity.

'You can't just change the lead of my story,' I insisted.

'I'm making your story better, David. It's my job.'

'*Better?* You've got to be kidding ...'

The argument raged for another ten minutes before the entire *HQ* staff headed out to the end-of-year Christmas lunch in Darlinghurst. Roz and I entered the bus through different doors and sat at opposite ends of the lunch table.

We eventually made our peace over a couple of bottles of wine and, in retrospect, I came to see that she was right and that the four women with whom I was now working were actually trying to help me.

'You know, David, we're all on your side,' Susan Skelly said to me not long after this incident, with the reassuring tones of a palliative nurse.

*On my side? She couldn't mean that. All of them. On the same side as me.* I had grown so accustomed to working for (mostly male) News Ltd editors in general, and Piers Akerman in particular, that I'd become convinced that the biggest enemies came from within one's own ranks. Death by 'friendly fire'. But not at HQ. This was journalism at its best and the reason why I began to flex my still underdeveloped writerly muscles.

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By this stage, my father was two years into his job as president of Condé Nast Publications Inc, the US parent company of the international *Vogue* empire. During his years running British Condé Nast, he'd grown the business from three publications—*Vogue*, *House and Garden* and *Brides*—to six, with the addition of *Business*, *World of Interiors* and *Tatler*, the 270-year-old British society journal that had been losing money until Condé Nast bought it in 1982 with twenty-five-year-old Tina Brown as editor. It had been the beginning of an enduring friendship between my father and Brown, as well as her husband Harry Evans, the legendary editor of Britain's *Sunday Times*, whom my father would later appoint the founding editor of *Condé Nast Traveler*, the magazine whose guiding principle would be 'truth in travel'.

In London, between 1976 and 1987, my father had also formed Britain's largest independent magazine-distribution company, in partnership with a Hearst Corporation subsidiary, as well as launched German *Vogue*.

Such was his success that one of his main competitors, Terry Mansfield, managing director of the Hearst Corporation's nine-magazine British subsidiary, remarked on his departure to the United States: 'When Bernard Leser came from Australia, he slowed down our growth dramatically at *Harpers & Queen*. I'm delighted he's going to America. I'll be one of the first people to stand on the jetty and wave goodbye.'

My father's contact book was the envy of any journalist and his networking skills that of an artist. 'He's the only fellow I know who goes to three or four parties a night,' Brian Walsh, managing director of Harrods, London's upscale department store, observed. 'Bernie went to the royal wedding [of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson] in July [1986]. He escorted the American actress, Claudette Colbert, and they sat at Nancy Reagan's table. On the way he stopped at the hospital to visit a sick Australian friend.'

But it was more than just consummate networking skills that made my father who he was. It was his consideration for those who worked for him that distinguished him from most other media titans, and yes, I know that must read like the blinkered view of a fawning son, but it is not just my opinion.

'He was so warm,' Sandy Boler, the woman my father appointed editor of *Brides* magazine, told me one day. 'He believed in people, where others didn't. I remember one woman who worked for *Brides* fell down the back stairs and broke her collarbone and, twice, he called to see how she was. When I had my ulcer

operation, he rang the surgeon to ask what the risks were to me. He rang my mother and grandmother to tell them how I was, how my husband [Adrian Hamilton] was and how the children were. That's not something you learn out of a book of good manners.

'And he had a deep respect for editors. If you went to him with an issue, he would say, "That's a real problem. Give me time to think about it." I call that seriously grown up. He made British Condé Nast such a happy place to work. He let the light come in, the warmth come in, the air come in. He opened up the house.'

By the time he and my mother left for New York in 1987, he was known in the Australian media as the 'King of the Glossies', the '*Vogue* man' who was going to take 'an elegant bite at the Big Apple'.

'Think of the male models in *Vogue* magazine: tall, lean, lightly tanned, languidly elegant. The epitome of drop-dead chic,' wrote Jane Cadzow, a friend and former colleague of mine at the *Australian*—as well as a future colleague at *Good Weekend*. 'Now think of Bernard Leser: mild-mannered, middle-aged, myopic. An awfully nice fellow but hardly the Greek god type. Which just goes to show that looks aren't everything.'

By this stage, he was on a first-name basis with most of the world's great fashion designers and photographers, with the editors-in-chief and proprietors of pre-eminent American, British, Canadian, Irish and Australian newspapers—men like Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer, Sir Warwick Fairfax, Kerry Stokes, Conrad Black, Robert Maxwell and Tony O'Reilly. He dined regularly with figures like David Frost, Harold Evans and Tina Brown, and spent more than one memorable evening with

Margaret Thatcher at a London reception, as well as Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh at Buckingham Palace.

On arrival in New York he was given reserved tables in restaurants like the Four Seasons, the Royalton and Le Cirque, tickets to the Metropolitan Opera and entree into the living rooms of people like Barbara Taylor Bradford and Dominick Dunne. He spent weekends in the Hamptons with the *New York Times'* managing editor A.B. Rosenthal and his wife, Shirley Lord. He was on friendly terms with *Cosmopolitan* editor-in-chief Helen Gurley Brown and her film producer husband David Brown, and Evelyn and Leonard Lauder of the Estée Lauder family.

He flew by Concorde from Paris to Marrakech for a Christian Dior event where he was transported in a flower-decorated, horse-drawn carriage to his hotel before a reception at the Royal Palace hosted by Morocco's King Hassan II; there were vacations in St Moritz and the villa in Cap Ferrat where Somerset Maugham had once lived. He was put up in hotel suites overlooking Key Biscayne, the Virgin Islands, Lake George, the outcrops of Montana, travelling first class wherever he went. He was given the world, and then some.

But throughout this time his ability to behave decently never seemed to desert him. One day, in 1993, his goddaughter, Kate Ayerton, asked him to host a luncheon for her in New York to mark her graduation from university. Neither her father nor her stepfather were able to attend. The only problem was that my father had been invited that same day to a small luncheon hosted by Bill and Hillary Clinton at the White House. Faced with the exquisite dilemma of his goddaughter or the leader of the free world, he chose the former.

While we both worked in magazines, we came at our jobs from different angles. My father's was a quest for excellence in publishing; mine was a quest for the 'truth', whatever that was supposed to mean. Certainly, at *HQ* magazine in the early 1990s, it was about trying to probe people and issues that we thought deserved relentless scrutiny.

And one of the people to fall into this category was Lady (Mary) Fairfax, the perceived villain at that time in the ruin of John Fairfax Ltd, the oldest family-run media company in the world, publishers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Melbourne *Age* and *Australian Financial Review*.

I'd first met Lady Fairfax in 1990 when she'd invited Merran and myself to accompany my parents to dinner at Fairwater, her sprawling mansion overlooking Seven Shillings Beach in Double Bay. My parents had known Lady Fairfax since the late 1940s, ever since her marriage to—and subsequent spectacular divorce from—Sydney lawyer Cedric Symonds. Mary Fairfax had then gone on to marry Warwick Fairfax, the chairman of John Fairfax Ltd. Over the years, she had transformed Fairwater into one of Sydney's premier salons, particularly after Sir Warwick Fairfax's death in 1987.

I'd spent twelve months trying to persuade Lady Fairfax to agree to an interview, given what was happening to the once-proud company that she and her son Warwick Fairfax now controlled. Warwick Fairfax's takeover of John Fairfax Ltd in 1987 had stunned the financial community, not only because of the amount he'd borrowed to do it—\$2.5 billion—but also because he'd pursued this mad venture even after the stock market crash of 19 October 1987.

By the time Lady Fairfax and I sat down to a lunch of braised chicken and apricot soufflé at Fairwater, her and Warwick's company was being placed in receivership with debts totalling \$1.7 billion. It was not an altogether pleasant meeting. Lady Fairfax wanted to see my questions in advance. (Four were rejected before I arrived, including one about her religion.) She also wanted to read the story before it was published, a request which was not granted.

The story I wrote was not a flattering one, as it explored details of her scandalous love affair, her harrowing divorce trial, her celebrated remarriage to Warwick Fairfax and her role in the decimation of the Fairfax empire. In the process, I also, against her express wishes, delved into her conversion from Judaism to Christianity and the fragility of her relationship with her firstborn son.

'Is she one of the most monstrously misunderstood women in Australia,' I wrote, 'or is she as deceptive as she is clever? Is she a manipulative, scheming woman, hungry for power, wealth and status? Or a tireless worker for the arts and charity, as well as a generous, fun-loving hostess and friend? Is she a family maker or an empire breaker? A proud matriarch who frequently owns up to only three children or a tormented mother of four? Is she a Jewess or a Christian? Does she sit atop staggering wealth or horrendous losses? Is she a figure of romance or of vengeance? And is it Mary or Marie?'

Needless to say, my parents were deeply embarrassed and Lady Fairfax never forgave me; she turned her back on me the next time we saw each other. (At least she kept sending my parents an annual Christmas card.) But I did this with a certain relish. I did exactly what Janet Malcolm had accused journalists of doing in her book, *The Journalist and the Murderer*. I played 'the confidence man, preying on people's

vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse'. That is a harsh version of my own motives but there's more than a kernel of truth to it. What I didn't do, of course, was expose (some of) my own motives for writing that story. I couldn't see then that in tearing down Mary Fairfax I was subconsciously fulfilling an even more compelling brief—tearing down the walls of my parents' impossibly rarefied social life, particularly my father's.

As I gained experience I would end up writing my first book—a devastating critique—about Bronwyn Bishop's rise to prominence in the Liberal Party, at a time when it looked possible—surreally so—that she might become Australia's first female prime minister. (Who would have thought that nineteen years after this book was published in 1994 she would still be in politics, now as Speaker of the House under a Tony Abbott-led government.)

My mother had shared a love of classical music with Bishop ever since their days together at musicologist James Murdoch's Australian Music Centre. What better sounding of the bugle could there have been then for me to spend six months writing a book that would unmask Australia's Boadicea as the political pretender and shallow ideologue she was?

I did this for years—to people like Mary Fairfax and Bronwyn Bishop—and, later, to John Howard, Alan Jones, Ron Walker and Gina Rinehart—as part of a journalist's prerogative to challenge those with real or putative power, wealth and status. But I also did it to make myself feel better about having come from the same side of the tracks as many of them. By challenging them I could defy my father, and by defying my father I could define myself in opposition to him. It was all rather sad and predictable really.

This smouldering rebellion didn't temper my love for my father, but it certainly informed it. I didn't like the way he carried his authority, the way he divided the world into those who'd succeeded and those who hadn't. I didn't like the skin-shallow world of fashion and its elitist presumptions, and I certainly didn't like the fact that *Vogue*, in particular, was the gold standard for how one looked and behaved. If I rummaged deeper into myself, I didn't like the fact that my father was seldom at home when I was growing up and that I could barely remember playing with him as a child, let alone having dinner with him during the week. (My parents were out almost every night.) I didn't like his Teutonic silences; in fact I recoiled in the face of them, and I didn't like the fact that my mother was always under such huge pressure to accompany him to events rather than stay at home with me.

I also didn't like the fact that he'd never flown economy, not once in his life, or caught public transport, or built a tool-shed where we might have communed silently over a lathe or electric saw. I didn't like how this fostered an impracticality in me that continues to this very day. I also didn't like the fact that when he went to England in 1976 and joined his Tory circles and private clubs like the Garrick ('a club where actors and men of refinement might meet on equal terms'), he sent my nine-year-old brother to a boarding school in the English countryside, far away from his home, his brother and sister, his school, his friends, his dog, far away from everything he ever loved—and very much against his will.

I had no idea how much my parents had agonised about this decision; how much advice they'd sought from various educators in the United Kingdom. All I could see, from my vantage point, was that my brother Daniel—whose entry into the world nearly twelve years after me had aroused the first fatherly instincts I'd ever

known—was not where he wanted to be: with his family. This brother of mine who, as a little boy, would scream for our parents not to go out to another dinner party, and then come crawling into my bed when they did; this same brother who would write me desperate letters from boarding school and who, later in life, would become my friend and confidant and help me through my own turbulent times.

I forgave our father all this because what was there not to forgive? *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. But it fuelled in me a desire to do battle. Battle with my father's values. Battle with the 'truth', as I saw it. Battle with falsity and pretence. Battle even with my heroes.

While still at HQ I went to Florence to duel—and that's exactly what it turned out to be—for ten heart-stopping hours with Oriana Fallaci, until that day one of the world's most famous journalists and certainly one of my idols. She'd been a giant in her profession, had covered wars, insurrections and famines, and interviewed everyone from Bobby Kennedy and Henry Kissinger to Indira Gandhi and the Ayatollah Khomeini. She'd always done what we, as reporters, had been taught not to do: she'd led with her heart in a completely partisan, hot-headed, indeed *Italian* manner. She'd torn her chador off in an interview with the Ayatollah Khomeini, describing it as a 'medieval rag'. She'd told a Catholic priest to 'go and shit on your mother'. She'd once said to Alfred Hitchcock: 'With all your cordial humour, your nice round face, your nice innocent paunch, you are the most wicked, cruel man I have ever met.'

Now Fallaci had cancer and didn't want to do the interview, but if she did, she only wanted to talk about her latest book, *Inshallah*. She didn't want to talk about journalism because, for her, journalism was finished and she felt nothing but

contempt for most of its practitioners. She didn't want to talk about her private life either, and in the twenty faxes we exchanged before I went to Florence, she reinforced that over and over again.

But after welcoming me into her book-lined apartment just beyond the Ponte Vecchio, the famous old bridge that crosses the Arno River, she then decided to talk about everything. She talked—and wailed at the same time—about the death of her father, mother and sister, all from cancer. She talked about her own cancer and how she believed she'd become sick when covering the first Gulf War in 1990; how she'd accompanied the marines into the desert and been forced to sit under a black cloud of toxic fumes as the oil fields burnt out of control.

She talked about how books were her children, how few women she'd befriended, and how she refused to see men as the antagonists of some feminist mythology.

At one point I asked her why she thought she was able to disarm so many people during the course of her journalistic career. Was it because she had offered something of herself? Her terrifying response made me see how ambiguous my question had been; she'd construed a sexual meaning that was never intended (although I later discovered she'd once likened a good interview to coitus).

'What should I have offered, for Christ's sake?' she exploded, pointing her finger at me. 'What should I have offered these people?'

Well, I'm suggesting ...

'No, no, no!' she said, standing up, her voice filling the room. 'What could I offer to the people I interviewed? In your opinion?'

Are you asking a rhetorical question or do you want ...?

'Yeah, you said, "Is there something you offered them?" What do you expect me to offer?'

I'm asking what it is that you think makes ...

'No! No! No! I want you to clear this incredible question. You said, "Is it something that you offered them?" To what were you referring? Offer what?'

Offer something ...

'What?'

Of yourself, some experience, something that makes them feel as though they are dealing with a human, someone they can relate to ...

At last she understood what I meant. She sat down, put her daggers away, and then said: 'Everybody knew who was Oriana Fallaci. Those who wanted to give [the interview] to me were very respectful. They were a little surprised when they saw me arrive in flesh and bones because they expected me to be a big woman. I entered and, eight times out of ten, they would say, "Is it you?" ... because I am so small. They expected to see a Viking.'

At dusk, Fallaci took me into the hills above Florence and we walked arm in arm through the same wooded country where she'd spent evenings with Alexandros Panagoulis, the Greek poet and resistance fighter who'd died in mysterious circumstances. Panagoulis had been her one true love and the subject of arguably her finest book, *A Man*.

Later that evening, in a restaurant in those same hills, she'd talked about her relationship with Deng Xiaoping, China's former leader, and how it had been 'a love story at first sight' between them. I asked her whether she had any interest in

interviewing Bill Clinton or Boris Yeltsin. Once again, she erupted, heedless of the fact we were in a packed restaurant.

'Do you think I would waste a second of my short life to do interviews? I HAVE CANCER, AND YOU WANT ME TO SPEND TIME WITH CLINTON AND YELTSIN?!"

After Oriana Fallaci, I stepped knowingly into the serpent's pit of the Australian rock industry to attempt to get the measure of the godfather himself, Michael Gudinski. I tried pulling teeth from my song writing hero, Paul Kelly, and I parodied myself unashamedly when writing a story on Peter Garrett, which begun thus:

'I once applied to be the lead singer of Midnight Oil. I'm five foot six with nearly a full head of hair, and I can carry a tune. Instead, they chose a guy who's six foot six, completely bald and sings like Dylan on a bad day. They made the right choice.'

It was all true. On leaving high school I'd auditioned as lead singer of the band that would become Midnight Oil. Rob Hirst, my friend from Sydney Grammar, was the drummer and he'd invited me to come and give a rendition of Jethro Tull's 'Locomotive Breath'. Peter Garrett did his version too. The better man got the job.

Writing for *HQ* during the late 1980s and early '90s was the ultimate training in learning how to pen long feature articles without boring the pants off your reader. Sometimes, though, it was the pants of the writer that needed to come off, as it did when I went on assignment one weekend to a nudist colony south of Sydney.

This was a significant moment. I came to see that if I could take my clothes off with complete strangers, there might be other baggage I could dispense with, although this realisation only came later. At the time, there was just the sheer dread

of the assignment. It was late autumn and I was going to a nudist camp near Mittagong to write about why it was some people preferred to live without their clothes on. What seemed perfectly clear from the outset was that at some stage during the weekend I was going to have to take my clothes off as well.

'I'd rather resign than do something like that,' Roz Gatwood offered by way of reassurance before I left the *HQ* office. And then: 'Don't forget to wear an apron when you're cooking.'

'And be careful. There's frost on the ridges at this time of year,' Fenella Souter chimed in. My colleagues had fallen about, weak with laughter, and I carried their collective hilarity all the way down into the southern highlands of New South Wales.

What to pack, though? If Fenella was right and there was frost on the ridges, did that mean beanies and socks? Would I need underpants or a jacket? What about hankies?

Prior to my arrival I hadn't grasped the fact that the naturalist movement was effectively divided into three wings: the Stalinist wing, where you were required to shed your clothes at the gate; the anarchist wing—represented by the nudist beach movement—where you would find little, if any, policing; and finally the progressive wing, where parents could come to a resort and take their clothes off while their teenage children kept theirs on.

That was the resort we entered, a progressive one, although I didn't know that until it was too late. For half an hour I stood in my caravan paralysed with fear. Then, finally, tentatively, I undressed and walked naked towards my first interview, with photographer Tim Bauer walking jauntily by my side. We were meeting the

daughter of the resort's manager, and her partner, poolside and we were to talk to them about the joys and perils of, well, being a nudist.

The only problem, and it was a significant one, was that when we got to the interview I saw to my horror that our interviewees—who were in their early twenties—were the children of nudists, not nudists themselves. They were fully clothed. We were completely naked.

'Hi there. David Leser from *HQ* magazine. How are you doing today?'

'Fine,' the young woman said. 'How are you?'

'Great,' I replied. 'Great to be here. Fantastic place. Tell me, how long have your parents been nudists?'

'Quite a while.'

'And have you ever been nudists yourselves?'

'No, it's not really our thing.'

I looked at Bauer, one of Australia's finest photographers. He was butt naked except for a camera around his neck. I was sitting shirtless, pantless, underpantless, with my legs crossed and a notebook balanced on my knee. There was a pen perched behind my ear. I was a study of mortification.

'Do you think nudism is a way of demystifying sex?' I asked.

'Not sure, mate,' came the reply.

Silence.

'Right, well do you think the body is the great leveller? Is this a way of removing tired old measurements of status and wealth?'

I approached the subject as if I were an anthropologist touring the backblocks of Burkina Faso. It was the most excruciating interview of my life. I stayed for half an

hour, then slunk back to my caravan to put my pants back on. It was a cold day beside the Wollondilly River, just as my colleagues had predicted.

Hundreds of people were arriving. They were setting up barbecues, picnic tables, playing table tennis and mixing drinks at the bar. No one had their clothes on. What to do? Would I interview people with my clothes on or off? Would I turn up to dinner in just my underpants? What about the guy in the spa with no neck I'd seen when I arrived? Would I have to get into the tub with him?

For hours I stood in my caravan—fully clothed and stricken. Then I summoned the necessary courage. I'd done one interview naked. It couldn't get worse. I took my pants off, picked up my notebook and pen, and went striding out into the bush, my manhood shrinking with each footfall.

'Hi, how ya going?' I called to my neighbours as they approached me from under the blue gums, all loins and grins. 'Great day.'

*Keep walking, David. Check out the river. Look at nature's bounty. Here's another couple walking towards you with nothing on. They're grinning too. Act like everything is fine. Keep walking.*

'Hi, how ya going? Great day.'

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In retrospect, it's not surprising that what eventually brought me undone was the one-hundred-year-old Arab–Israeli conflict.

Even though I was no Middle Eastern expert in the way of reporters like Robert Fisk, Thomas Friedman, the late Marie Colvin or our own Paul McGeough, I had been wrestling with the subject for years. And notwithstanding my newfound fascination for writing psychological profiles—along with naked self-parodies—to

me there was still nothing quite like the shuddering events on the streets of Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and Jerusalem.

This seemed especially true in 1993, after Israel and the PLO signed their historic peace accord on the White House lawn, opening up yet another extraordinary chapter in the history of this blood-soaked region.

One evening I sat in the comfort of my living room on the northern beaches of Sydney and watched—like millions of others around the world—the extraordinary moment when Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin hesitated, then shook hands with his arch-enemy, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat. I burst into tears, much to the horror of my then four-year-old daughter, Jordan.

‘Why is Daddy crying, Mummy?’ she said.

‘Because they’re making peace in Israel,’ her mother replied.

I remember thinking, *This could be it. This could be the miraculous moment.*

A few weeks later, Ali Kazak, the Australian representative in Canberra for the Palestine Liberation Organization, called me at home to inform me that if I could get to the West Bank by Monday morning, Dr Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian team’s chief negotiator at the Madrid peace talks, would see me. Any later than Monday morning and she would be returning to PLO headquarters in Tunis. There was no time to lose. It was Thursday afternoon.

Within a few hours I was booked on a flight departing Australia on Saturday morning, arriving in London at 5.45 am the next day. I then had an eighteen-hour wait in London before my connecting flight to Israel at midnight. I would land in Tel Aviv at 5 am on Monday, take an Israeli taxi to Jerusalem, change to a Palestinian taxi in East Jerusalem, and hopefully get to Dr Ashrawi’s home in Ramallah by 9 am.

Ashrawi was a formidable interviewee. She'd been dubbed 'the diva of the West Bank' because of her haughtiness and the fact she was regarded as the individual most responsible for igniting former US Secretary of State James Baker's sense of moral outrage over the treatment of Palestinians.

She held a Master's degree in Renaissance English literature and a doctorate in medieval English literature, and in her radical student days had been appointed Lebanese-based spokesperson for the General Union of Palestinian Students. It was in that capacity she'd first met the then rising star of the Palestinian resistance, Yasser Arafat.

In 2003 Dr Ashrawi would be the cause of near-apoplexy among members of Australia's Jewish community when she was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize. Accusing her of having failed to condemn Palestinian terrorism, the Zionist movement and its supporters boycotted her lecture and sought to prevent her from speaking in Sydney University's Great Hall.

I was on edge before I boarded the plane in Sydney. I had Dr Ashrawi's considerable résumé demanding my attention. I had United Nations resolutions and previous failed peace conferences rattling around in my head. I had my own experiences of the Lebanon War and first intifada to reflect on. I had my time as a correspondent there six years earlier, when I'd left Merran in Sydney to pursue a wild dream. I had the joy of the first story I'd written for the *South China Morning Post* on the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which I'd attempted to explain the competing claims of two people vying for the same piece of land.

In my economy-class seat en route to London I was thinking about this and the origins of colonialism, Zionism, Pan-Arabism and terrorism. I had my old lecturer

in Middle Eastern politics, Dr Robert Springborg, weighing in on patron-client relationships in the region, the use of proxy wars and the role of the military in Arab society. I had Father Lazarus up there on the Mount of Temptation. And I had the entire history of the Jewish people pressing its considerable claims on me: my father and his family departing Germany in 1939 with barely months to spare before the gates of hell slammed shut; and then, two years later, on my mother's side, in that Baltic land of pine forests and fast-flowing rivers, the extermination of her family.

Also in the frame was the honour that had been bestowed on my father a few months earlier by the American Jewish Committee, an organisation dedicated to safeguarding the welfare and security of Israel and Jews worldwide. On 2 June 1993, before 650 guests at the New York Hilton, the committee had presented my father with the Human Relations Award in recognition of his (implicit) lifelong commitment to Zionism, and his (explicit) achievements in the publishing industry, in international political and business circles, and in the world of philanthropy.

Many of the city's movers and shakers were there to pay tribute, among them Abe Rosenthal, columnist and former executive editor of the *New York Times*, who gave the keynote address; James Wolfensohn, soon to become the president of the World Bank, who had presented my father with his award while declaring him to be 'a man of unique character, loyalty, warmth, integrity and independence'; and Leonard Lauder, president and CEO of Estée Lauder, who had offered the toast and raised my father's hand aloft, describing 'the joys and pleasures of watching Bernie do great things [during our] long and dear relationship of more than thirty years'.

Four days later, my father had written to Alfred Moses, the president of the American Jewish Committee, thanking him for what had been a spectacular—and deeply moving—night.

'But now we move on,' he wrote '[because] nothing stands still. In this life and in this world, we have to prove ourselves over and over again, each day, each hour, and demonstrate that we have the qualities of character and professionalism expected of us.'

So this trip of mine to Jerusalem three months later felt like no ordinary assignment. It felt like some kind of holy mission. 'This is the story you have to write,' I kept telling myself, 'because this is your role as a journalist, this is your privileged position as a chronicler and as a Jew, and as the son of Bernard and Barbara Leser—to help explain this conflict to Australians and, yes, just like your grandmother told you on the birth of Jordan, to help bring peace to the Middle East.' *You have to keep proving yourself over and over again, each day, each hour ...*

And only now can I look back and say of this deranged person who happened to be me, 'You poor, sick and sorry fuck.'

I didn't sleep a wink on that twenty-four-hour flight from Sydney. Nor in the eighteen hours between landing at Heathrow and taking the midnight flight to Tel Aviv. Nor, again, in the five hours that followed, en route from London to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, where I was meeting my brother Daniel, who would photograph this assignment.

By the time we arrived at Dr Hanan Ashrawi's house on that October morning at 9 am I had gone fifty hours without sleep. This was just the beginning.

After the interview I returned to my room at the American Colony Hotel to try to rest. It was late morning and, after the adrenalin rush of talking to Dr Ashrawi, impossible to switch off. I decided to eat something, lie by the pool, visit the Old City, bide my time until I could head to bed for an early night.

At around 8 pm I took a sleeping tablet and lay there waiting for sleep to rescue me, but I kept returning to the interview and to the story I was beginning to craft in my head.

*Dr Hanan Ashrawi was born in Ramallah and educated at the American University of Western Beirut ... No, too prosaic a beginning. What about: Dr Hanan Ashrawi is a Palestinian woman and Christian ... No ... The Middle East peace process hangs in the balance and its final outcome may well depend on a Palestinian Christian woman educated in Beirut ... No, it's too ... Look, come back to this in the morning—it's time to sleep and the story's not due for another week and the interview is in the can. But don't forget this is truly historic. There might be peace for the first time between Arabs and Jews. Remember when you were ... yes, the rocks and stones of Gaza, my God we were nearly killed ... I shouldn't have gone there without checking the military radio first. How could I have been so stupid? I can still see that man with the brick in his hand ... and Merran thinks I'm being melodramatic about it! And to be Jewish and a journalist here, now—who would have thought? Those Palestinian flags flying in the streets today, those photos of Arafat. Unbelievable ... here in East Jerusalem. Stop. Breathe. Count sheep. Make that goats; this is the Middle East. My God, the Middle East. The Middle East stands at the crossroads. No, way too clichéd. Dr Hanan Ashrawi leans back in her chair, takes a deep drag on her Marlboro Red and says: 'The Israelis are prisoners of their own pathology.' Yes, that's it ... Have a*

*look at it in the morning. Well why not write it down now you're awake? Yes, but you need sleep. What time is it? It must be morning in Sydney. Merran will be getting Jordan ready for school. I hope she's alright—she seemed so terse on the phone the other day ... How on earth am I going to get to sleep? A jerk-off, that'll help ... Yes, a good long stroke, that's it ... Oh what about that raven-haired beauty in the shop this afternoon? And the way she looked at me. That half-smile, that tilted head, those dusky legs under that tease of a skirt. Oh yes, those thighs ... yes, yes, yes, this will get me to sleep ... Fuck the Middle East and fuck everything in it ... Fuck the Arabs and the Druze and the Maronites and the Moabites and Hittites and Shiites and Yemenites. Fuck them all and fuck that woman in the shop. Fuck her fuck her fuck her fuck her fuck her ...*

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A Jerusalem dawn can be a divine experience—a blazing orange ball rising up over the Mount of Olives, bathing the dolomite of the city and the desert beyond in burnished gold. Then the call from the minaret—an insistent, cleansing, confessional cry from the back of the soft palate ... *la illah illa Allah ...la illah illa Allah ...* reverberating across dust and cobbled stones, calling the faithful to prayer.

I'd been awake all night when dawn's lament broke that second morning. *Next year in Jerusalem.* Ever since I was a little boy I'd heard these words spoken with reverence and hope, the wistful pleas of my grandmother and mother and aunts and uncles at the end of every Passover and Yom Kippur. After all the years of sorrow, *next year in Jerusalem*, we would meet in this place of sacrifice, pilgrimage and false prophecy, in this contested, fractious, beautiful, holy land.

For the previous six years, during the intifada, the streets of Jerusalem's Arab quarter had been unnaturally quiet, the people seething with resentment, their main weapon of protest a commercial strike or hanging washing from clotheslines in accordance with the colours of the outlawed national flag.

On this day the Old City was a festival of Palestinian flags, the colours of the Arab revolt fluttering from thousands of rooftops. PLO signs were daubed over the walls of the city and T-shirts emblazoned with Yasser Arafat's grinning face were being sold openly.

Years of secret talks, many of them in secluded homes in Norway, had forged links between these former enemies. Jews and Palestinians had begun talking to each other in ways never seen before, and for all the deep flaws, for all the perceived pro-Israeli biases of the peace process, it seemed to be yielding unimagined results: an end to a conflict that had convulsed a region and traumatised the world for nearly half a century.

For the next six nights I stayed awake: worrying about the story, worrying about not sleeping, worrying about Merran juggling work and children, worrying about whether I was going mad, which I was. No amount of alcohol, sleeping tablets or self-worship seemed to work. I dragged myself around East Jerusalem and the West Bank interviewing other Palestinian women with a rising sense of panic. And this only made the fear of bed more acute.

By the time I flew out of Israel with my brother Danny, a week after my arrival, I hadn't slept in 194 hours. Any sleep I'd managed could only have been calculated in microseconds. Even on the plane back to London I couldn't switch off. I'd seen the Israeli opposition leader (now prime minister) Benjamin Netanyahu

three rows in front of me and had spent two hours devising ways of approaching him for an interview. (In the end I just walked up to him, introduced myself, and asked him if we could talk. He said no.)

When I got to my parents' apartment in St John's Wood I collapsed on their huge double bed, drew the curtains and listened to the faint ticking of the living-room clock. 'Just sleep and we'll see you in a couple of hours,' my sister Deborah, said.

I stretched out on the bed and lay there for an hour beseeching sleep to come. I began talking to myself as though I were an infant. *There, there, little one, it's okay. Just relax and lay your head down to sleep. Everything is alright. Go to sleep, little baby, don't you cry.*

But baby did cry because it was at this point that the horrifying thought that I might never sleep again occurred, that I would have to be hospitalised in order to have sleep induced, that I would need to be narcotised out of commission or I would surely die of sleeplessness.

And it was then that loud, racking sobs began rising out of the depths of me, from somewhere I'd never known existed. Wave after wave of anguished tears turning into moans.

My brother and sister found me there two hours later, curled in a foetal position and whimpering into my pillow. My sister seemed bewildered by my state, and all the more so when I declined her suggestion of going out for dinner that night to a Russian restaurant. My brother, who had watched my slow descent all week, could see I was in no state to go out, borscht or no borscht.

Finally my cousin Annette arrived at our apartment with Indian takeaway, a large joint, two strong sleeping tablets and the sweet benediction of a neck massage. She broke the insomniac circuit and I passed out for six blessed hours. I was never quite the same again.

## TO BEGIN TO NOT KNOW

There are many ways a man may fall through the floor of his own life. He might suffer a serious accident. His wife might leave him. His boss might sack him. His friends might betray him. His son or daughter might reject him or, far worse, fall ill or die. He may experience one or more of these calamities and know he no longer has control over his existence the way he once did, or thought he did. He hears a click in his head, he feels a grinding deep in his bones, a change in the frequency of his biorhythms, and he knows he is no longer the man he was.

The crack in my road opened up during the Middle East peace process of 1993; after that I became more like a crazed beast in my bed than a man in repose, sleeping sometimes only two hours a night, if at all. Until this moment I'd never questioned sleep. I'd never thought of it as something I could or could not do. I was tired. I went to bed. I read a few pages of my book. I fell asleep. I didn't think about it. I didn't will it. It just happened.

After Jerusalem I was plunged into my own Divine Comedy: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura ché la diritta via era smarrita.* 'In the middle of the road of my life,' wrote Dante, 'I awoke in a dark wood where the true way was wholly lost.'

Dante was thirty-five when he found himself in his dark wood, assailed by leopards and she-wolves. I was thirty-eight. Something in me had snapped. Some level of confidence or competence in my own recuperative abilities had been lost to me. I began dreading the night. I began thinking about sleep the way some people

view a difficult assignment. Could I solve the riddle of the sleep logorithm? What would happen if I didn't? What was the best and quickest formula for success? I had enough sense to know that the very act of posing these questions was a guarantee of failure, but I had no way of arresting my fall into Dante's *basso loco*, his low place.

I stopped sleeping in the same bed as my wife. I moved into the cottage adjoining the house. I began wearing a sleep mask and stuffing plugs into my ears. I created a tomb for myself, making sure the doors were closed tightly and the curtains drawn. I stopped drinking coffee. I started taking valerian tablets and sleeping tablets when the valerian didn't work, which it never did. I took to playing relaxation tapes for an hour before lights-out—ambient lullabies that dulled my senses with their appalling massage-room monotonies. I started doing yoga. I began seeing a sleep psychologist, then another after the first one was killed stepping off a kerb in Manhattan and looking the wrong way. I saw a doctor, an osteopath, a kinesiologist, a Chinese herbalist, an acupuncturist and a homeopath, who asked me if I ever got angry with myself.

'Sure,' I said. 'Doesn't everyone?'

'Maybe,' he replied. 'But I'm interested in *your* anger. How do you get angry with yourself and when?'

'When I am trying to write the lead of a story and can't find my way in,' I told him.

'What do you do when that happens?' he asked.

'What do I do?'

'Yes, what do you do?'

'I scream at myself.'

'How?'

'What do you mean how? Do you want me to show you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I say, "You fucking arsehole, David."'

'How do you say that?'

'I scream it.'

'Do it.'

'Now?'

'Yes—do it.'

'Well, I say: "YOU FUCKING ARSEHOLE, DAVID, YOU FUCKING FUCK. YOU'RE THE BIGGEST FUCKING LOSING FUCKFACE ON THE FUCKING PLANET. YOU FUCKING FUCK."'

Long silence.

'Would you speak like that to a child?'

'Absolutely not,' I replied. 'Never. No way.'

'Do you have a photograph of yourself as a little boy?'

'Yes I do.'

'Put that photo next to your computer, and the next time you're tempted to speak to yourself like that have a look at that little boy.'

It was good advice. It didn't cure my insomnia but it got me looking at aspects of myself that I'd been ignoring for a long time. It also stopped me screaming. Mostly.

I needed to stop thinking about sleep. I needed to take more rest breaks from my computer. I needed to stretch. I needed to redress my chi—I was way too

overheated. I had to change my diet. No chilli. No tomatoes. No capsicum. No alcohol before bed. I took to buying dope again and to rolling medicinal spliffs after dinner. I reverted to childhood cups of Horlicks with hot milk, sometimes adding—against advice—tumblers of cognac or whisky. I began running on the beach in the morning, up and down, north and south, for forty-five minutes, then swimming laps of the ocean pool, up and down, east and west, hoping the physical efforts of the day would pay dividends by nightfall.

I would sleep three or four hours, then wake and not be able to go back to sleep. Sometimes I would scream out in frustration.

Then I would read, but lose concentration, being too tired to follow the narrative. I would count sheep, goats, dogs and cats. I would turn on the television with the sound down, following shapes and imagined dialogue for hours on end. I would creep into the house to make myself a cup of tea, stand by the bedroom doors of my wife and daughter, listening to their gentle, enviable stirrings. I would return to the gloom of my bed and start counting all over again, until the first cracks of light began filtering into my room and I would crawl out of my boneyard, head down to the beach and then return to my family for breakfast.

And all this had begun happening as the warrior queen of the Liberal Party, Bronwyn Bishop, was entering my life, and the birth of our second daughter, Hannah, was drawing close.

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At the end of 1993, Michael Heyward, head of Text Publishing, commissioned me to write a book on Bishop, believing—as I did at the time—that the Australian Liberal

Party, after a decade in opposition, might just be stupid and desperate enough to put its faith in a soprano-singing disciple of Ayn Rand.

As it transpired, of course, they were not, but they might have been had not larrikin writer and filmmaker Bob Ellis stood against her as an independent for the safe Liberal seat of Mackellar. With a dramatic swing against the Liberals in the March 1994 by-election, Ellis ensured not only the death of Bishop's grandiose ambitions, but also the commercial death of my book as well.

The country had been saved from a political absurdity but, for me, six months of furious research and writing would end in publishing oblivion. Apart from a cover story in *Good Weekend* and the odd positive review, the book sank without a trace.

And then came the birth of our second daughter, Hannah, at the Sydney Adventist Hospital in Wahroonga, an effortless birth by comparison with her sister's buttocks-first entry into the world five years earlier.

'Jordan, your sister is about to come,' I ran out to the waiting room to tell her as her mother pushed down into the second stage of labour.

'Hang on, Daddy, I've just got to finish my noodles,' she said.

'Forget about the noodles,' I replied. 'Don't you want to see your sister arrive?'

'Okay, I'm coming,' she said, stuffing another big spoonful into her mouth as I lifted her out of her seat to witness the miraculous arrival of her little sister, Hannah Lilly Morrison Leser, in the early hours of 29 July 1994.

We were living in a restored farmhouse in Mona Vale on Sydney's northern beaches where, a year earlier, Merran had been appointed the cultural planner for Warringah Shire Council, responsible for helping devise policies and strategies for

the cultural life of nearly 150,000 people living in one of the most sought-after areas of Sydney.

Anne Summers had just offered me the job of staff feature writer for *Good Weekend*. There, for the next five years, I would come to enjoy more professional success than I'd ever known, writing cover stories on social and political issues for the most widely read weekend magazine in the country, while at the same time heading personally in a diametrically opposite direction.

While juggling working from home with two young children, I would take on the now-late Richard Carleton from *60 Minutes* to see whether he could absorb the scrutiny the same way he gave it. *Tick tick tick*. I would break bread with Pauline Hanson at her home just after her incendiary maiden speech to the House of Representatives, drink Bundy and Coke with her in her kitchen and then rifle through her CD collection when she wasn't looking. (I found a Gene Pitney CD with the song 'Town Without Pity' on it. It was perfect.) I would spend five hours with Alan Jones in his Newtown warehouse—while his black manservant served us tea and scones—and then another nine years dealing with the lawsuit that followed. I would enter the locked ward of Rose Porteous and Gina Rinehart's bizarre and poisonous feud in Perth. I would fly with John Howard aboard the prime minister's plane and talk to him about his faux love for Bob Dylan.

'Who's your favourite musician, Mr Howard?'

'Oh, Bob Dylan.'

'What's your favourite Dylan album?'

'I reckon "Blowing in the Wind" would have to be.'

'And do you like Dylan more for his lyrics or his music?'

'Oh, the music for sure'.

I would joust with Michael Kroger, the ultimate networker in Australian Liberal Party politics, and spend an excruciating time with the then Liberal Party treasurer Ron Walker at Florentino's restaurant in Melbourne, where I sneezed all the way through lunch. He would sit there like a man pinned to the wall, my questions making him angry, and most probably sick, in equal measure.

I would love the job, all those extraordinary characters, the tremendous exposure, the fuel-injected adrenalin each morning. I would even have a book of some of these profiles published called *The Whites of Their Eyes*, just in case anyone had any doubts that the writer had got well and truly behind enemy lines.

But by 1999, my boat had capsized. Wind squalls first, then dark nights of rolling thunder. Apart from losing the ability to sleep, my arms had started to pack it in too. No sooner would I sit down at the computer to write than tingling sensations would shoot through my hands up to my neck. Given that I couldn't sleep and now couldn't type, it felt like my career and life were dangling in front of me.

During this period—and perhaps not by accident—I went to Melbourne to interview Peter O'Connor, the Jungian therapist who'd had a bestseller in the 1980s with his book *Understanding the Male Mid-Life*. As a family therapist, psychotherapist and dream analyst, he'd seen a lot of men undergoing mid-life crises. Many of them were aged between thirty-five and forty-five, and their stories often overlapped or resonated with each other.

Their relationships had broken down but they had no idea why. Their careers had stopped providing fulfilment, or had come to a screeching halt. They were happily married but felt their lives were effectively over. They were constantly

having affairs but remained dissatisfied. They'd begun feeling jealous of their children—their successes, their youth. They'd begun contemplating death.

'If there was a general pattern,' O'Connor told me, 'it was the loss of meaning. They realised that what were once goals could no longer sustain them. Many of the men found themselves withdrawing from family and friends or, alternatively, engaging in manic activity—anything to avoid looking at their inner lives. Their social conditioning had led them always to equate action with strength. Now they didn't know what to do.'

To Peter O'Connor this uncertainty was the key. 'The whole art of that second half of life is to begin to not know,' he said. 'I think our culture mistakenly thinks that knowledge and wisdom are the same thing, so it's very hard for men to say, "I don't know." In the workplace it's banned.'

'Real growth comes in the feeling life, in the inner life, by being able to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity long enough to find out what it is that you need to know. It's what Keats once called "negative capability" —the ability to sustain oneself in doubt and uncertainty without an irritable reaching for reason.'

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In 1994, my father also began to fall through his own exalted floor at Condé Nast. He was sixty-nine years old and for nearly half a century all he'd known was the upward trajectory of a remarkable career.

Since moving to New York in 1987, he'd not only presided over established magazines like *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, *Self*, *GQ*, *Gourmet*, *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*, he'd also launched *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Details*, *Allure*,

*Architectural Digest* and *Bon Appetit*, as well as spearheaded in 1993 the launch of *GQ Japan*, in association with Chuokoron-sha, Japan's leading publishing company.

I'd witnessed him in action during these Japanese negotiations after he invited me to join him in Tokyo for a week of boardroom meetings and dinners: each day, the two of us sitting opposite six to eight Japanese executives with an interpreter translating each side's position, then at night sitting on cushions in the finest restaurants eating delicacies from the sea washed down with endless bottles of warm sake. I was amazed by my father's grasp of the issues, the precision of his words, the formality and courtesy with which he dealt with our Japanese hosts.

S.I. Newhouse was also impressed by my father. Over the years he'd written him notes, often at Christmas time, expressing his delight with their working relationship, words which, for a man almost congenitally incapable of small talk, had given my father great comfort and pride.

Five years into his New York posting, at the end of 1992, Newhouse had written to all Condé Nast's editors-in-chief, publishers and corporate executives, seeking to quash rumours of my father's imminent departure, announcing instead that my father would be continuing as president of the company until the end of 1995.

'I want to mention my own great pleasure with Bernie's decision,' Newhouse wrote. 'His fine judgement and his network of close friends, within and outside Condé Nast, are unparalleled. Therefore, I expect that Bernie's presence will help to maintain the stability and maturity in our business affairs that have been invaluable to Condé Nast in the past and will now continue for many years.'

Imagine my father's shock, when in January 1994, on his way back to New York from a family holiday in Sydney, he received a late-night phone call from Si Newhouse at the Okura Hotel in Tokyo.

'There'll be an announcement in tomorrow's *Ad Age* [*Advertising Age*] saying that you're stepping down as president and that Steve Florio is taking over,' Newhouse told my father.

'We've heard these rumours before,' my father replied. 'Just deny them like you always do.'

'I'm afraid this time it's true,' Newhouse countered.

There was an awful silence before my father said, 'You shit,' and slammed the phone down on the man he'd served faithfully for thirty-five years. He'd told Newhouse on a number of occasions that he would be prepared to step aside—with due and fair notice—whenever the time came to hand the reins over to a new generation.

Newhouse probably doubted this, and with good reason. As Carol Felsenthal pointed out in *Citizen Newhouse*, published in 1998, 'Newhouse knew that Leser, a tremendously gregarious man, loved the people, the pace, the business, too much to retire voluntarily any time soon.' Besides which, S.I. Newhouse Jr was never very good at the niceties of a dismissal.

In 1987, shortly before my father's appointment as president of Condé Nast, Newhouse had sacked William Shawn, the legendary editor of the newly acquired *New Yorker* magazine after initially telling Shawn he could stay in the job as long as he wanted. In 1988 he'd sacked Grace Mirabella, editor-in-chief of American *Vogue* for the previous seventeen years. Mirabella only learnt about her dismissal when her

surgeon husband, William Cahan, called her to say that her removal was at that very moment being aired by Liz Smith on the evening news. My father was not party to the decision; in fact, he learned about it from his doctor, the same Bill Cahan.

‘I was appalled by the way that was handled,’ he told me, ‘and I told Si that at the time. He said to me, “Well, that’s my way. We had to get rid of her quickly.”

Never in my father’s wildest dreams did he imagine he would suffer the same treatment. Years later he would reflect on this and be deeply grateful for Si Newhouse’s generosity towards him, particularly after his retirement, but at that time he was more shaken and dismayed than I’d ever seen him.

What he didn’t know was that his successor, Steve Florio, president of the *New Yorker*, was impatient for his job and was finding it increasingly difficult to work with Tina Brown, then editor of the magazine. Tina Brown couldn’t stand the brash and boisterous Florio, and Newhouse was worried he might end up losing both of them.

On 13 January 1994, Newhouse announced ‘with great pleasure’ that my father had been appointed chairman of Pacific operations for Condé Nast and would be returning to Sydney to take up the position in June. He later gave a warm and generous speech in my father’s honour at a farewell dinner at the 21 Club, lauding my father’s achievements.

He failed to mention, however, that at the age of nearly seventy, my father was now being asked to report to S.I. Newhouse’s first cousin, Jonathan Newhouse, a man my father liked immensely but who was thirty years his junior and someone who had always reported to *him*.

Twelve months later, my father resigned from the day-to-day Australian operations and handed over the managing directorship to Didier Guérin, a Frenchman with a penchant for pink bow ties and personalised numberplates; his two cars were ‘Voila’ and ‘Voila 2’.

My father remained chairman until 1997 before resigning his position, thereby entering a post-Condé Nast universe where the planets not only shone less brightly but actually seemed out of alignment. For the next few years he served as senior adviser and then non-executive chairman to Eric Beecher and his Text Media Group in Melbourne, while also serving on the Australian National Gallery council under both Lionel Bowen and Kerry Stokes. He was then appointed chairman of the National Gallery of Australia Foundation and, from 1996 to 2003, chairman of the council for St Vincent’s Centre for Immunology.

My father welcomed these opportunities to give something back to Australia after so many years away, but the truth was this period never quite matched the dazzling lights which had illuminated his world for the better part of four decades.

What made matters worse was that by the time he departed from Condé Nast in 1997, *Australian Vogue*, the magazine he’d founded thirty-eight years earlier, was in a state of crisis, with plunging circulation, a revolving door of editors and poisonous internal politics. It was a subject my friend Jane Cadzow described for *Good Weekend* because God knew it was not a story I was going to touch.

‘*Vogue* sales are falling sharply,’ she wrote. ‘In five years, the one-time style bible appears to have lost close to a third of its readers. Most of its staff, too. At Sydney head office, where the fashion department recently flounced out en masse, no one knows who’s going next.’

Cadzow had sought an interview with Didier Guérin, by this time chairman of the Australian company, but her request was denied. So too was her request for an interview with Guérin's managing director, Peter Gaunt, who referred to Cadzow in a phone call to my father's office as 'the girl from *Good Weekend*'.

My father chose to speak to Cadzow, but it was a decision that did not go down well with his successor.

'I am most disappointed to hear that you decided to communicate with the reporter [from *Good Weekend*],' Guérin wrote in a letter to my father on 30 November 1998. 'We have good reasons not to cooperate with this reporter, and I wish you would have discussed those reasons with us before deciding to ignore our request.'

My father was deeply unimpressed. 'I think the tone and substance of your first two paragraphs are totally out of order and unacceptable,' he wrote Guérin four days later.

*Peter [Gaunt] did not request that I should not speak to 'the girl'. Whilst he did explain that you had chosen not to speak to her, he added that I would obviously act as I saw fit, or words to that effect.*

*Peter's verbal reference to 'the girl' conveys ignorance of the fact that Jane Cadzow is a highly respected senior writer for Good Weekend. She interviewed me several years ago on behalf of the Australian and treated both Vogue Australia and me in a generous and fair manner.*

*You are out of order in stating that I decided to 'ignore your request'. There was no request. But had such a request been made I would have had no hesitation in explaining to you courteously and openly that I would cooperate. I did make it clear*

*to Jane, however, that I would not comment about current or recent matters but confine myself to reflections about the history and philosophy of Vogue.*

*My main point is, has always been, and will always be that Condé Nast and Vogue are the best and that my belief and loyalty to Condé Nast Publications and to the Newhouse family are permanent!*

There it was again. My father's deep respect for the craft and calling of journalists. There was more, too, but it was the two last paragraphs that ended up capturing best for me the kind of man he was, and the kind of values that he'd always fought for, and that I had fought so mightily against for a good part of my life.

'Perhaps matters of courtesy and custom have changed and I am old-fashioned,' he told Guérin.

*However, communication of the kind you have sent me should have been in the form of a letter with a proper salutation and a proper conclusion.*

*May I suggest that when, in future, you have concerns, or there are matters in which you seek my support or cooperation, you call me and discuss your thoughts with me directly, in the manner in which we seem to have been able to communicate in the past. The kind of discourteous memo you have sent me produces exactly the opposite to what is in Condé Nast's best interests.*

My father might as well have been quoting from *Debrett's Guide to Etiquette and Modern Manners*, the so-called 'contemporary guide to civilised living' that passed out of fashion with the top hat and monocle.

## FIELDS OF GOLD

Paul Gauguin discovered in his mid-thirties that he no longer wanted to work in a bank; he wanted to paint. He moved to Tahiti. Albert Schweitzer realised at thirty-eight that he couldn't continue his career in music. He wanted to be a missionary doctor in Africa.

In my case, I wanted to live in Byron Bay. By the end of 1999, I had been with *Good Weekend* for five years. During the previous eighteen months I had worked myself to a standstill profiling, among others, Neil Finn, Roger Woodward, Michael Kroger, Ron Walker, Kim Beazley, John Howard, Rose Porteous, Gina Rinehart and Alan Jones, not to mention a clutch of stories on issues like drug law reform, the environmental destruction of Bali and Rupert Murdoch's takeover of the National Rugby League competition.

I was forty-three years of age and I still couldn't sleep. My elder daughter, Jordan, was ten years old and her sister Hannah five. They loved their home and their Steiner school deep in the bush of Frenchs Forest, where they had nap time and felted their own slippers and used pencils rather than pens and sang songs about the seasons and the magical world of elves and fairies. Merran loved her work too and our lives in Mona Vale. She'd recently coordinated new public artworks for Campbell Parade in Bondi and worked as a public-art consultant for the Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games. All that passion and expertise in integrating art and culture into the urban environment was finding expression.

And yet I was aching for something else. I was filled with the kind of fantasies a man experiencing a mid-life crisis might be expected to be having and that Peter O'Connor and I had talked about years earlier.

I was thinking about becoming a farmer and waking before dawn to milk the cows or sit by a stream with a knife and whittle a stick—even though I didn't know any farmers who actually had time to whittle sticks. I was pondering the simple joys of planting vegetables and growing shrubs and fruit trees, and making jams from all the cumquats, apricots and sour cherries that were inevitably going to fall into my well-irrigated earth.

I was contemplating going to Rwanda, Bosnia or Cambodia, helping out in the refugee camps, learning how to build bridges and dams and mudbrick homes—something, anything, to assist a people in crisis.

I was conjuring up the great Australian novel, or at least the great New South Welsh novel, so I could sit in daily commune with my creative, intuitive side rather than the rational, logical side of my brain. I was imagining dropping out completely, just leaving the whole capitalist enterprise behind and playing my guitar in a café like I'd done when I was eighteen and still had hair.

And so, with twelve months leave of absence from *Good Weekend* in mind, I said, 'Let's go to Byron Bay for a year.' I'd been moonstruck by the place since first visiting in 1972 as a seventeen-year-old. It was there I'd felt the first stirrings of connection to land and sea. I'd never before seen a coastline and hinterland so staggeringly beautiful—emerald-green country spilling onto pearl-white sands and a turquoise bay and, yes, I admit, those gold-top mushrooms from the local cow paddock definitely enhanced the picture.

For the next few years, Byron Bay would become a kind of soul home. It was rain-soft and green and full of music. People didn't come to Byron Bay to further their careers. They came to surf on perfectly formed waves, and to get stoned, and

to play music and to save the rainforests, to grow their own food, perform their own home births, set up farmers' markets, wildlife corridors and worm farms, and to build homes from recycled timber in hamlets and towns all the way from the Bay to the fringes of the Nightcap National Park.

Much of this had been made possible by an injection of funds from the Whitlam government into the Australian Union of Students in 1973 to host what became not just the Aquarius Festival—the biggest alternative musical event the country had ever seen—but also the birth of the hippie movement in Australia.

For the son of the founder of *Vogue* magazine, this was a great parting of the waters, at once a deliverance from the plague of bon voyage cocktail parties and after-theatre suppers, and a rolling back of the tide of conservatism and elitism that I had come to associate so closely with my father's world.

But what a faux hippie I had been. In 1975 I spent a week with friends at Wategos Beach ruminating on life, smoking enormous 'Mullumbimby madness' joints, eating three-course meals, consuming numerous bottles of wine, all within a stagger of one of the most exquisite beaches in the world. None of us at that time had jobs, or ever looked like getting one. We were privileged, middle-class Australians experimenting with sex, drugs and ill-formed ideas, and even though we thought we had a firm grip on the world, in truth we had absolutely no idea whatsoever. Richard Nixon had just resigned in disgrace because of the Watergate scandal; Cambodia was entering a new time zone called Year Zero, which we were to later learn was a Khmer Rouge euphemism for genocide; in neighbouring Vietnam, Saigon was falling to the North Vietnamese; and across the Timor Sea Indonesia was on the verge of invading East Timor. Meanwhile, the Whitlam government's three

years of quixotic reform were heading towards an abrupt and spectacular end and my friends and my only contribution to this epoch-defining moment was to send a telegram to Whitlam saying: What's Going On?

But Byron Bay had changed radically in the ensuing twenty-five years. It was still a place for hippies, but it was much more than that. It was an Aboriginal meeting place, a women's place, a healing place, a place where the counterculture rubbed up against the city. It was a place where Australia first greeted the sun, and where the streets were named after poets and the plumber took his shoes off at the door.

It was also, of course, an easy place to parody, especially when self-parody was within plain view. Within those first few weeks of arriving in 1999, I grew a goatee, put a stud in my left ear, joined a yoga class, purchased a bag of dope from Nimbin and took up surfing at the Pass. I also had a tea-tree and peppermint concoction rubbed into my scalp by a nubile blonde called Ambrosia with rings in her nose.

I weighed up doing rebirthing with Daniella, dolphin energy healing with Ansula, and a tantric sex workshop with Oceana and Icarus (all in the name of investigative journalism). I baulked at crystal bowl therapy, numerology and singing lessons with Prakash, mainly because my plate was already alarmingly full and I didn't like the sound of crystal bowl therapy. Nor did I think I'd remember the name Prakash, even though I now know it is the Hindi word for 'luminous'. My enthusiasm reached fever pitch in those early weeks and months, so much so that old friends in Sydney thought I'd begun sounding more like a Christian revivalist or hippie snake-oil merchant than the discerning journalist I'd once been.

I think it was about three weeks into our stay when I spied a woman across the road swaying in her bedroom window, semi-naked in the reflected light of a crescent moon.

I was on the verandah playing my guitar and, from where I sat, it appeared she was moving gently to my music, absorbing the melodies, shivering and floating towards me. It was only when I stopped playing and she continued to quiver and bend in the moonlight that I realised she was actually listening to the stereo in her bedroom. But such was the splendour of the moment—the warm frangipani breeze, the blanket of stars twinkling in the firmament, the sweet intoxication of the joint—that I was fully prepared to believe it was me and my guitar that had caused her to partially disrobe and drift into my field of vision.

‘Darling, I think we should live here,’ I said to Merran as she stepped out to join me in the inky night. ‘We’ve only been here three weeks and you already want to move,’ she replied, a little too crossly for what I thought was such a sacred moment. ‘What about our lives in Sydney?’

‘I know, I know,’ I replied. ‘It seems a hasty decision. But it could be the right one.’

I wanted to elaborate but I could hardly tell her the main reason for this abrupt change of plans was the willowy form across the road.

Plus I’d given an undertaking to return to my magazine job; our daughters, Jordan and Hannah, were counting on resuming their lives at their old school, with family and friends around them; and their mother, my wife, was eager to pursue her passions in the city and complete her master’s degree in urban design. She had no interest in rural design.

'I don't want to talk about it now,' she said. 'We've just got here. Let's discuss the matter in six months' time. If you still feel like this we can talk about it then.'

'Fine,' I said, peering over the balcony. I had numerous questions demanding immediate answers. If this woman was dancing in this window across the road from me, then what about all the other windows in the Shire? Might there not be moon dances taking place everywhere, on beaches and hillside properties, in old community halls?

Was it not possible we were meant to be here, at this time in history, as the great shift in evolutionary consciousness was apparently occurring, as Mars was lining up with Jupiter for the most extraordinary celestial event of the millennium? (That's what the guy in calico pants with the big fat joint in his mouth had told me at the Mullumbimby markets the previous week!)

Was it not possible, therefore, that we needed to change postal addresses, to move in permanently across the road from Aphrodite and her girdle of finely wrought gold in order to live differently?

My yearning for something different had nothing to do with the external, reflected glory of career success, or scaling the lofty heights of logic and rationale, but everything to do with accessing the parts of myself that I felt might have been lost to me.

I could detect this in others far more easily than I could detect it in myself; men like Alan Jones, whose life I had pored over for six weeks and who, by his own admission, scorned introspection. Time was too short, he told me, to spend on self-analysis. 'I know what I'm about,' he said. 'I haven't got time to be saying, "Who am I?"'

For me that was the most interesting question of all. Who was I—or who would I be—if all else were stripped away? Who was I, for instance, when I was not working, achieving, striving, succeeding, performing the tasks—and playing the role of—father, husband, son, brother? Who was I if my primitive will or my limited intellect failed me? Who was I when I was trying to sit still in a room? *A restless lunatic, that's who.* Who was I if my health failed me or I lost my children, wife, home, job, bank account, mental acuity—all the things that propped up my sense of personhood? Who was I if I no longer had the community's respect, or if I no longer had my job, or my right arm? Who was I in the afternoon of my life—to quote Carl Jung—if the ‘program of life’s morning’ had passed?

These were probably the kind of self-indulgent questions only a new arrival to the shores of Byron Bay might have the time and inclination to ask, but they were also age-old questions that mystics, theologians, philosophers, psychologists and scientists had been asking since the dawn of time. *Who are we?*

*We are unknown to ourselves ... and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it ever happen that we should find ourselves?*

Friedrich Nietzsche

Sometimes, in my deeper reflections, I realised I was not just one person, I was many. I was Tommy, the Irish rogue (full of poetry and shite); and Jean-Claude, the adventurous libertine; and Heinrich, the German-Jewish intellectual; and Hyme, the neurotic Jew; and Clint, the handyman (very rarely in evidence I might add); and

Herbert (my middle name), the responsible family man. I was the driven careerist, the people-pleaser, the seducer, the frightened little boy, the aggressive interrogator, the lazy sod—all of these characters sitting at my own table, housed in the politburo of my own personality, vying for space and recognition, devising strategies for coping in a chaotic world.

Was I all of these people or none of them, and if I was none of them, then who the hell was I? The sum of my life experience, my brain functions, my thoughts, my DNA, my diet, my culture, my personality, my relationship to others? Or was I connected to some deeper non-physical reality that was apprehendable, knowable?

At university I'd loved this kind of stuff, rejecting all economics-related subjects in favour of psychology, philosophy, comparative religion, and Middle Eastern history and politics. In philosophy I'd studied Descartes, Rousseau and the existentialists and I'd found most of it bloodless, except for the weeks of furrowed-brow contemplation where I'd been forced to consider questions like: 'Is Life a Dream, Yes or No? Discuss in 5000 words.'

'No, it's not,' I wrote, but how the hell would I have known, given where I was in my own life at that age? Today I look back at my childhood friends, at the places I used to play as a small boy, the family holidays we went on, my parents, once so young and vigorous. I look at the girlfriends I once had—what were their names again? I look at the opinions I once held, so resolute and firm; the books I was so absorbed in, yet can't remember a line of today; the stumbles and bruises, the little triumphs ... and all this now just a faint echo in the canyon of my life, as though it might even have been someone else's life, just as Shakespeare described with this immortal line in *The Tempest*: 'We are such stuff as dreams are made of.'

At university, I'd studied comparative religion, dipping into the spiritual traditions of all the major religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and on my first major overseas trip through Asia, the Middle East and Europe, I'd found myself drawn to the well-known and out-of-the-way temples, shrines, synagogues, churches and mosques. I loved the pageantry and colour of the Balinese Hindus; the sense of light and space of the mosque; the hushed reverence of the Buddhist temple; the familiar austerity of the synagogue; the splendour and iconography of Europe's churches. I loved listening to the various calls to prayer — the bells, the trumpets, the hand drums, the exhortations and invocations. And then watching the act of prayer itself: the believers coming through their various doors, east and west, in search of communion with something higher and deeper, something beyond themselves but connected to some kind of collective consciousness or intelligence.

Maybe they were all just fucked-up, lonely souls clutching at the idea of a deity so as to feel less desperate about their lives, or maybe there was something bigger, something truly mysterious, going on. Who the hell knew? But I was fascinated by these questions and the older I got the more important they seemed to become.

In 1992 I'd managed to secure an interview for the *Bulletin* with the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and political leader-in-exile. He'd arrived in Australia for what was to be only his second visit to the country and was offering just one interview to the print media.

I flew to Perth with Merran with the kind of childlike excitement I might have reserved for an audience with the Beatles. I was not just meeting a world leader, a

great political and spiritual figure; to my mind I was also entering a fable—one that spoke of a legendary country known as Shambhala, where the forces of religion and atheism had eventually collided.

During our interview the Dalai Lama talked about the gratitude he felt towards his ‘enemy’, the Chinese, who had, since their invasion of Tibet in 1959, obliterated villages, burnt men and women alive, forced children to shoot their own parents, compelled monks to publicly copulate with nuns, mutilated the land, desecrated a culture ... and here he was feeling gratitude?

‘I’m trying to promote the value of compassion,’ he said, ‘and not just based on attachment to those who are close to you, but rather for all beings, irrespective of what that person does to you, or whether they are your enemy or not. Compassion and tolerance are not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength.’

The Dalai Lama said many other things to me that May morning in 1992, words that I have held on to ever since, but it was not these words I remember most clearly. What I remember most is the Dalai Lama holding my hand and Merran’s after the interview.

‘Can we have a photograph with you?’ I’d asked him as we were preparing to leave.

‘Why not?’ he replied, giggling. ‘With my glasses on or off?’

‘What about both,’ I said. And with that the Tibetan leader took both our hands in his, turned to the camera, and posed like a movie star, with his sunglasses on and then off.

An hour later I was on a Perth sidewalk with a vast media contingent waiting for the Tibetan leader to arrive for his first and only press conference in the country.

One of the journalists, a former colleague of mine from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was waiting with me after having been called away from covering WA Inc, the Royal Commission into corrupt state government–business dealings.

He wasn't happy about having to turn his gaze East.

'Fucking Dal-aye fucking Lama,' he said.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Well, what a load of shit this is, don't you reckon?'

'No, not really,' I replied. 'But you're obviously underwhelmed.'

'Are you kidding? Who gives a shit about the Dal-aye Lama anyway?'

'I don't know. You might be surprised.'

'Not bloody likely, mate. They've got to be fucking kidding.'

Twenty minutes later the room was full—newspaper, radio and television reporters up front, camera crews towards the back—when the world's most famous monk entered unannounced. Smiling and bowing, his hands cupped in the traditional Buddhist greeting, he walked along the front row, taking in the faces of the Fourth Estate. Suddenly he stopped in front of my former *Herald* colleague and for at least ten seconds looked into this journalist's eyes with a beaming smile, while the journalist, big, burly and fresh from his Royal Commission, blushed like a little boy.

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During my years of tortured sleeplessness I'd begun to study Buddhist texts in an attempt to learn to meditate. I wanted to still my mind, but every time I focused my attention on my breath my mind began to boil and hiss. One compulsive, out-of-control thought followed another, speeding towards me from a million directions. I couldn't sit still for more than five minutes. My body ached. My nose itched. I'd

count my in-breath, then my out-breath, and before I knew it there'd be another saturation bombing of thoughts, fantasies, projections, recollections and anticipations. This was the uproar no one else could hear when I decided, a year before we left for Byron Bay, to go on a week-long meditation retreat with Sogyal Rinpoche, the author of the spiritual classic, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

The retreat was held on the shores of Myall Lakes, about 200 kilometres north of Sydney, and every day we spent endless hours in a large white marquis festooned with flowers, prayer flags and paintings of reincarnated Tibetan spiritual masters.

We were there to learn about the 'nature of mind', karma, rebirth, compassion and impermanence, but most of all we were there—or at least *I was there*—to learn how to stop being ambushed by incessant thoughts.

There were three ways, apparently, to do so. The first was to use an object of beauty or inspiration—a flower, a crystal, an image of Buddha or Christ—and then rest the mind lightly on that object. A second technique was to recite a mantra so that the truth of the words could vibrate through the body, thus purifying both mind and body. The third technique was to watch the breath, focusing lightly on the awareness of the outbreath and, at the same time, letting go of all the grasping and desire. That's the one I chose to follow and this is how the outer stillness sounded from the inside:

*Breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing ... you see? You can meditate, David, it's not that hard, you just have to follow the breath and know that everything is fine and God that woman is sexy over there and why doesn't that guy shut up and stop asking questions every time we have a break? Shit ... breathing in,*

*breathing out, and surely it's time for dinner soon because I'm absolutely starving ... oh bugger: the breath. Bloody hell, David, you can't even follow your breath for a minute, what kind of brain-dead idiot are you? ... Breathing in breathing out breathing in breathing out—there you go, that's easy. I wish Merran was here too, this is fantastic, so good for you, I can feel things shifting, but I wish I'd finished that story before I left because that middle section just isn't working and oh for fuck's sake breathing in breathing out but that last story wasn't one of my best so I have to make this next one a killer because I can't afford to get forgotten and shit if only I'd won two more Walkleys when I was nominated that would have been incredible instead of Liz Jackson winning 500 of them—I mean she's good, she's really good, but oh right, okay, breathing in breathing out—this is crazy I need to call Dad and see how he is 'cause he has no idea what this meditation business is all about and bloody hell breathing in breathing out ...*

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Victor Hugo once said there was nothing more powerful than an idea whose time had come, and by the turn of the century we were renting a house on the edge of Arakwal Country, home to the traditional custodians of the Byron Bay district for the past 22,000 years.

Our house, owned by Rob Hirst and his wife Lesley, was a beautifully renovated little fibro shack in a garden of newly planted grevilleas with sweeping north-east views to Cape Byron and the wetlands behind Tallow Beach. The house had been bought from the royalties Rob had earned co-writing *Midnight Oil* classics like 'Beds Are Burning', 'Power and the Passion' and 'Dead Heart', and it was now ours for a 'mate's rate' for the next twelve months—although these twelve months

would turn into five years. My old drummer friend from Sydney Grammar School had granted us our own little patch of glory on the rim of the Australian continent.

From day one, Merran and I began walking to the Cape each morning, then swimming in the turquoise shallows of the Pass before breakfast. I began noticing things I'd never noticed before and, yes, for an urban Jew boy nature was a revelation. We would follow the path of bush turkeys collecting leaf litter for their nests and stand fascinated for minutes at a time as the lace goannas tried to steal eggs from those nests, scuttling away like naughty children. We'd watch ospreys and white-breasted kites soaring above the bald rocky cliff face and dolphins leisurely patrolling the bay.

On a good day—and there were many staggeringly good days—we would watch board riders, kayakers and bodysurfers vying for the perfectly formed point break, and we would watch flocks of seagulls dive-bombing schools of pilchards swarming nearby, mackerel circling the pilchards, and then, on one occasion, a pod of twenty or more dolphins herding them closer to shore.

'That's the most incredible thing I've ever seen,' Jordan shrieked with delight that particular morning, before dreaming that night of a dolphin kissing her on the end of her nose.

On one of those morning walks to the Cape I met a woman standing under the lighthouse, looking slightly befuddled, as if she'd lost her compass. Her long hair was silvery and wild, and under her wide-brimmed hat you could see a wind-blown face and a pair of piercing blue eyes.

'Do you know what time it is?' she asked me.

'Ten o'clock,' I replied.

That was the extent of our conversation. The following morning, at the very same spot, she repeated the question.

'Same time as yesterday,' I replied, grinning, but she had no idea what I was talking about.

On the third morning, before she could even utter the words, I told her she was half an hour early; it was 9.30. She gave me a baffled look and trudged on, up to the lighthouse, looking like a figure from a Scandinavian folktale.

Only later that week, at a dinner given in Byron Bay for Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, did I find out that my lighthouse acquaintance was Helena Norberg-Hodge, a friend of Suzuki, the Dalai Lama and Prince Charles, and that she'd been taught by the American linguist Noam Chomsky. She was a linguist herself and the only Westerner in the world who could speak the language of Ladakh, the mainly Tibetan Buddhist enclave in north-west India.

Far from being the befuddled fairy woman of my imaginings, Norberg-Hodge was a highly intelligent and committed anti-globalisation campaigner, determined to build awareness of how deliberate government and business-led economic policies were separating people further and further away from their food sources.

She'd moved to Byron Bay not just for its natural beauty but also because she could see this was home to one of the largest concentrations anywhere in the Western world of people trying to live outside the paradigm. She wanted to be part of the great experiment, and she wanted to crusade from here.

I suppose after about six months that's what we decided too. We wanted to stay. We wanted to be part of our own experiment in living outside the city, although it's true that, given the transportable nature of my work, this was a far

easier transition for me to make than for Merran. But she'd agreed eventually—and willingly—because she felt the pull of Byron and, more than that, the pull of community in ways I'd never even contemplated.

In the ensuing years she would draft a cultural plan for Byron Shire, curate and project manage sculptural shows, deliver a range of art and cultural ventures for public and private organisations up and down the coast, help steer tree-planting and park reclamation programs, join 750 other women on a hillside to protest—naked—the looming war in Iraq, join a women's group and generally get involved in dozens of community-based strategies. So committed was she to her sense of civic responsibility that in the early years a small group of her female friends even formed a pseudo committee to stop her joining committees.

Until our arrival in Byron I'd never really thought much about what a community was, let alone imagined I could be part of one. It's true that as a journalist I'd always felt part of the noble collective enterprise that was good investigative reporting; and as a Jew, despite my deep disquiet about Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, I felt—culturally at least—part of a tribe that I could call my own.

But that was not the same thing as being part of an alternative rural community where people felt bound to each other through their children's schools, their community halls, their farmers' markets, their pub nights, their bush dances and, more grandly, their collective sense that here was a place worth preserving and celebrating; a place worth tying themselves to trees for, lying in front of tractors for, demonstrating, picketing and agitating for, playing backroom politics for, railing, agitating and never resting for.

Merran had always understood this and, more particularly, the role that local government had always played in knitting people's lives together, but to me this had always been far less interesting than whatever was going on in the capitals of the world—Washington, Jerusalem, Cairo or even Canberra.

In our first few years on the North Coast I came to see community as a party in the forest under an equinox moon. It was about building a village in the sand with my daughters. It was the beach at high noon, among the surfies and hippies and mohawks and joggers and bare breasts. It was Aquarius balls just for Aquarians. It was women with five children to five different men. It was a flotation tank opposite Woolies.

It was about a sense of place, spirit of place, *genius loci*, and the living, breathing record of Aboriginal elders who could tell us what it was like before DDT and 245T and CFC and KFC and GMO. It was about a once-proud old abattoir town of blood and guts that had turned itself into the non-conformist capital of Australia, where people like George the Snake Man drove around in his van full of caged carpet and brown snakes (he was the one you called in the middle of the night when something long, dark and sinuous had slithered across your floor); where Zenith Virago, the Buddhist celebrant, helped people embrace death and dying in more conscious ways; where former US surfing champion Rusty Miller taught people something of the philosophy and joys of the sea; where Colin Heaney transplanted his acid experiences of the 1960s—and I'm guessing here—into kaleidoscopic glass; where Mandy Nolan, often pregnant but always uproarious, entertained people as the town's resident comedian; where Di Morrissey, the highest-selling female author in the country, wrote her novels; where Ian Cohen, the man who'd single-handedly

tried to stop an American nuclear-powered warship from entering Sydney Harbour, had his home; and where political writer Mungo McCallum was always cooking up trouble for our political masters, not to mention a few local government figures. ‘You’re despicable,’ he told councillor Ross Tucker one day. ‘Well, you’re despicable too,’ Tucker retorted.

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I was still on a year’s leave of absence from *Good Weekend* when Deborah Thomas, editor-in-chief of the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, called me in late 2000 with an intriguing offer. ‘Come over to the *Weekly* and write profiles for us,’ she said. I thought she must be joking or, perhaps, have mistaken me for someone else. I’d never read a copy of the *Weekly* before, let alone contemplated writing for it.

‘I’m still an employee of *Good Weekend*,’ I replied. ‘And we’re living in Byron Bay.’

‘I don’t care where you live,’ she said. ‘Just come over to the *Weekly* and do for us what you’ve been doing for *Good Weekend*.

I told Deborah I’d think about it and a week later bought a copy of the magazine at Sydney Airport. I hid it under the *Economist* as I strapped myself in for the flight home. (‘How are you ever going to write for the magazine if you can’t be seen reading it in public?’ Merran chided me later.)

I returned to Sydney a few days later to meet Deborah for what turned out to be a delightful lunch, one in which she promised me the world. I decided to join her team.

Deborah was true to her word. She delivered the world to me with my first major story for the magazine: an interview with Anna Murdoch, former wife of

Rupert Murdoch, whom I met on a golden northern summer's afternoon on New York's Long Island.

'[Rupert] behaved badly,' she told me, 'and I've waited all this time for him to make it right again, but he never took the opportunity.'

Anna Murdoch was talking, of course, about the break-up of her nearly thirty-one-year marriage to the world's most powerful media magnate, and his relationship with Wendy Deng, the Chinese-born former intern at Murdoch's Star TV in Hong Kong.

She told me she had tried to save the marriage but that her former husband had no interest in salvaging it. 'He was extremely hard, ruthless, and determined that he was going to go through with this no matter what I wanted, or what I was trying to do to save the marriage. He had no interest in that whatsoever.'

I might have now been living in Byron Bay doing salutes to the sun under the she-oaks, but I still knew a good story when it dropped in my lap, and this one was a world exclusive being delivered with deadly aim by a woman finally deciding to break her silence and set the record straight.

Two months later Deborah had me flying over the Pyrenees and the snow-capped Atlas Mountains into Marrakech to interview Malika Oufkir, the adopted daughter of King Hassan II who, along with her mother and five brothers and sisters, had been jailed by the Moroccan king for fifteen years before managing to escape with two of her siblings. (They'd spent three months excavating a shaft and tunnel using a spoon, an iron bar from one of their beds and the lid of a sardine can.)

Malika and I had met in Los Angeles on my way back to Australia from interviewing Anna Murdoch. She was having lunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel with

Tina Brown, and my father and I were there for one night, flying in opposite directions—him to New York, me back to Byron Bay.

Tina Brown was by this stage the editor of *Talk*, a monthly glossy that had been launched two years earlier on Liberty Island with 800 guests, including Demi Moore, Salman Rushdie and Madonna. *Talk* was owned by Harvey and Bob Weinstein of Miramax films and Brown was in Los Angeles to talk to Malika about a movie based on her life.

Malika and I met and spoke for no more than thirty seconds. Two months later, after first clearing it with Deborah Thomas, I called Malika in Paris, to see whether she would agree to an interview. She did, and from the moment we met again—first in Paris, then flying together to Marrakech to attend a friend's wedding—I knew we had formed one of those unshakeable bonds that occasionally occurs between journalist and subject. Once again, I owed this meeting to my father.

For eight rarefied years, Deborah Thomas flew me around the world to interview some of the most remarkable women I've ever met. Susan Sarandon in New York, Anjelica Huston in Los Angeles, Helen Clark in Wellington, the McCartney sisters in Belfast, and even Dame Edna Everage in Denver, Colorado, where she (he) managed to bring the house down three nights in a row with her time-honoured ability to turn suburban banalities into theatrical uproar.

In Australia, the *Weekly* gave me access to other extraordinary women too—people like the blind writer, poet and former salon-keeper Barbara Blackman; Rupert Murdoch's mother, Dame Elisabeth; the two Fionas—Fiona Stanley and Fiona Wood, both Australians of the Year; Janet Holmes à Court; and painter Judy Cassab.

All through these years I was reminded time and time again of how much pleasure I had always derived from my relationships with women—wife, daughters, mother, friends, colleagues, interview subjects—and how this driving impulse which I had always witnessed in my father was now finding full expression in his son as a profile writer of women for Australia's leading women's magazine.

Perhaps the woman I came to love most during that time was Irina Baronova, the former Russian dancer who, at the time, was eighty-six years old, nearly blind and living on a glorious ridge in the hills above Byron. She'd greeted me at the door with her feet turned out like Charlie Chaplin's and a kiss on either cheek.

At first glance she appeared as fragile as porcelain, but when she spoke her voice was gutsy and her manner full of the kind of dramatic flourishes you'd expect from a former White Russian prima ballerina.

We sat opposite each other and I commented immediately on the beauty and blueness of her eyes. 'I don't know what my eyes look like,' she replied, in her still-thick Russian-Romanian accent, 'because I can't see myself in the mirror. That's why I don't put makeup on, because I can't see where the skin finishes and the lips start ... where are the eyelashes, if there are any left. Maybe it's good. I can't see any wrinkles, hooray.'

She laughed, then fixed me with her beguiling but near-blind gaze and said, 'I see you have something light on top, but you have no head, no face [laughing some more], so if I want to see what you look like, I have to come nose to nose really to inspect your face.'

'Would you like to do that?' I asked.

'Yes, please.' And with that she pulled my face towards her, grabbed both cheeks and gave them a squeeze. 'Yes, nice,' she cooed. 'Good, now I can see you.'

That was the beginning of our little love affair. We talked for hours throughout the afternoon and into the evening about the joys and sorrows of her remarkable life. At one point she spread that life out for me in photo form on the table between us.

'That's me in *Swan Lake*,' she said. 'I played Odile ... And that's me in *Bluebeard*. I was the last of the six wives—the one who got the better of the husband. And that's Aurora's Wedding, part of *Sleeping Beauty*, and I was Princess Aurora ... and here I am as the Queen of Shemakhan.'

In another era—seventy years earlier—Irina Baronova had been one of the three so-called Baby Ballerinas with the legendary Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, performing on the most illustrious stages of the world. She'd danced in London for King George V and Queen Mary (and their successors King George VI and Queen Elizabeth); as well as Adolf Hitler and his Minister for Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, both of whom had visited her backstage in Berlin in 1936.

She'd collaborated with the greatest choreographers of the twentieth century—Leonide Massine, George Balanchine, Bronislava Nijinska and Michel Fokine—and artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Marc Chagall and Salvador Dali, who designed her costumes and stage sets.

She'd known everyone: Charlie Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Shirley Temple, Clark Gable, Grace Kelly, Cary Grant, Noël Coward and Marilyn Monroe—and, of course, the pre-eminent dancers of their time, Rudolf Nureyev, Margot Fonteyn and Mikhail Baryshnikov himself. Vivien Leigh and Sir Laurence Olivier had been

godparents to her two daughters. She'd had a wild affair with a young Yul Brynner and an eighteen-year marriage to the great love of her life, Cecil Tennant, London's leading theatrical agent of the 1950s and '60s.

And here we now found ourselves, in another century, in another country, taking in the gathering dusk, drinking straight bourbons, smoking Alpines and talking of life, death, love and music. I couldn't get enough of her—nor could my mother who, on meeting her, felt as if she'd found a true companion in the world of music, culture and European refinement.

When I later interviewed Irina at the Byron Bay Writers Festival I saw 300 people fall in love with her as I had. For an hour one could have heard a pin drop as we picked our way through her life—her escape from Russia as a child during the Bolshevik Revolution, her subsequent life of destitution in Romania, her arrival in Paris as a nine-year-old to study ballet, her meteoric rise to international stardom, her marriage to Cecil Tennant and then his sudden, tragic death. All of this had the audience captivated.

'Do you ever miss the roar of the crowd?' I asked her as we came to the end of our interview.

'Oh no,' she said, 'it's too late for that. That was a long time ago.'

'Would you like to hear it one more time?' I then said ... and before she'd even had the chance to say yes or no, the crowd had risen to its feet, clapping and roaring. As I stood there, arm in arm with Irina, there was not a dry eye in the house. Certainly not mine, and certainly not hers.

These were the stories I now dreamt of as a journalist. Stories that connected. Stories of the heart. For years I'd gone looking for dirt, so much so that Ian 'Molly'

Meldrum had once said to me during the course of my profiling his then business partner Michael Gudinski: ‘I’ve heard about you. You come across as a nice guy, then you turn into a cunt.’ Admittedly Molly was drunk at the time, but maybe he’d had a point. Stuart Littlemore QC said much the same thing a couple of years later when I called him about his friend Richard Carleton for a *Good Weekend* profile. He told me he deplored the kind of profiles I did, and then accused me of being a ‘prick’, sneaking around in the dark looking for dirt to dump on people.

Perhaps that was true. Perhaps that was the only way I felt I could get under the guard of tougher pricks and cunts than myself. Be a prick and a cunt too. I’d liked to think I was a fair prick and a balanced cunt, but that might have been wishful thinking on my part.

Some journalists are addicted to war. Some can’t leave their nation’s capitals for the thrill of political combat. Some want to write about food or music or architecture. A new way of baking chicken with guavas perhaps; a break-through album from a rising star; a new post-modernist structure that redefines a city.

In Byron Bay—and with the *Australian Women’s Weekly*—I wanted to write about people whose lives added something to the collective human endeavour. I can see how earnest that looks on the page, but it was the truth. I wanted connection, and the *Australian Women’s Weekly* made that possible.

With few significant exceptions I’d never really profiled people of true goodness before. I’d mostly written about rogues and rascals, people with giant egos and massive flaws and often a good many things to answer for. It was impossible to spend five weeks in the sinkhole of a Gina Rinehart and Rose Porteous feud and not feel sullied yourself. Or to spend great chunks of your life trying to size up Pauline

Hanson, Bronwyn Bishop or Alan Jones and not think the world was full of monumental hubris and self-delusion. In doing that one could easily forget that the world was potentially as good a place as it was bad; that for all the people betraying the public trust, committing the indefensible, wreaking havoc and misery in their own and other people's lives, that there were also those producing works of art, writing poetry, making music, tending the sick, reaching out, giving up time and money for something far bigger than themselves. It was easy for journalists to forget this, or at least it was easy for me. It was easy to think the only stories that really mattered were the ones where someone was getting killed or maimed or stitched up or doublecrossed or dispossessed; that lying, cheating and dissembling were the norm.

Even during the course of covering the Bali bombings for the *Weekly* in 2002, even in the face of all that murderous, unspeakable horror, what struck me most were the acts of heroism and the outpouring of love that followed.

Actually, that's not right. What struck me first was the chilling arbitrariness of life and death. You hated the song that was playing in the Sari Club that night so you left the dance floor and died.

The song just happened to be Sophie Ellis-Bextor's 'Murder on the Dancefloor'.

*You'll just have to pray if you think you'll get away*

*I will prove you wrong I'll take you all away*

*Stay another song I'll blow you all away*

*Hey, it's murder on the dancefloor*

Or you dropped your wallet at the bar of the Sari Club, bent down to retrieve it, and you lived while the guy next to you lost his head. Or you decided on an extra-long shower before stepping out into the night and you woke to a new dawn. Or your taxi dropped you off outside the nightclub and you walked straight into the arms of death.

How easily the tears flowed during those days. The night before my flight to Bali I'd had a farewell drink with one of my closest friends, Jennifer Byrne, who throughout the previous thirty years had reported on just about every human catastrophe one could think of—genocide, war, famine, insurrection, terrorism, natural disaster—and she'd managed to cover them all with distinction and, it should be said, a fair dose of necessary detachment as well.

Not now. Not during this period. Now she couldn't stop the tears. Now she felt she was crying for every human horror she'd ever witnessed, for every child she'd seen lose a parent, for every parent who'd seen a child go before them.

My father and I had been thinking much the same thing on that day before my flight to Denpasar, as we'd sat in a car listening to 'Fields of Gold', recorded by the late Eva Cassidy. My father had just come out of hospital following a hip operation and I wanted to drive him home before leaving for Indonesia. We'd sat there holding hands and crying together as the melody wrapped us in its afternoon glory.

It's twelve years now since that dreadful week in Bali. It took days for the horror of what happened to sink in, although there's a strong chance that it never will. Families destroyed in an instant. Parents and children annihilated, maimed or permanently traumatised. Classmates, best friends and lovers torn from one another.

That group of children who lost their mothers. That man who lost both his wife and daughter. The man who lost his two brothers. The family whose two sons and daughter-in-law were ripped from them. The football club that lost seven of its finest. On and on the roll call of dead and missing. Bridal parties cut down, birthday parties mercilessly cut short or never held. Beds never slept in. Last declarations never made.

During the days I spent on the island after the bombing I came to the conclusion that it was perhaps only in grief, or in the face of death, that we find ourselves drawn to the devotional. Perhaps these are the times, rather than when we feel vaguely happy, that we share our common humanity most strongly. We have less to hide, less to defend, and so we allow ourselves the possibility of being more open to the pain of others, to the pain of the world.

On my second day in Bali I'd joined a large public ceremony as it made its way along Jalan Legian, the once humming lifeline of Kuta and Legian, towards the burnt out shells of the Sari Club and Paddy's pub. All around me were floral wreaths and messages of condolence, and hundreds of Balinese people in sombre procession—men carrying flowers and wearing T-shirts saying 'Together For Life'; women holding hands or carrying their infants; older children in their slipstream, so quiet and so beautiful it was enough to bathe your eyes clean.

Suddenly the silence was broken by an anguished scream. It was a Balinese man wailing himself into a trance for his lost wife. All you could do was stand and listen and bow your head.

Next to me, a Balinese woman stared blankly into the ruins. She was in the Sari Club too, that night, but somehow escaped with just burns to her arm.

Eventually we found ourselves at Ground Zero, and as police and security looked on, we sat down in front of the twisted wreckage to pray or meditate or simply pay homage to the lost and broken-hearted. It felt, as Allan Rogers from Portland, Victoria, said to me later that evening, ‘like everybody had just become one’.

‘As much as it has taken a tragedy for this to happen,’ he said, ‘everyone has come together. It doesn’t matter whether you are Americans, Australians or Balinese ...’

I’d felt this when I met two Australians of Turkish Cypriot extraction, Mustafa Sumer and his cousin Kursat, in the aftermath of the bombing. Three of Mustafa’s brothers had been in the Sari Club that night, two of them managing to escape with shocking burns, gaping shrapnel wounds and permanently shattered eardrums. The third brother, Behic, was not found, and even though Mustafa, his eldest brother, was clinging to the faint hope he was alive—he might have lost his mind and wandered off into the paddy fields—in his heart of hearts he knew Behic was gone.

‘We loved each other so much,’ Mustafa told me, his eyes brimming with tears. ‘Everyone said they’d never seen a family so tight ... He was green-eyed and always smiling ... he had a fourteen-year-old son ... he loved life ...’

These men had been strangers to me and photographer Marc Gerritsen half an hour earlier, but suddenly the four of us were crying together and hugging one another as though we’d always been part of each other’s lives. Our hearts had suddenly cracked open and in that raw, tender, unforgettable moment their suffering had become ours.

So many acts of heroism, small and large. One man was walking towards the Sari Club when he was knocked to the ground by the force of the blast. When he looked up there was someone in front of him on fire. He rolled around in the mud to get wet, donned a motorcycle helmet, and walked towards the flames to pull the man out. How many people risked their lives in such a manner?

And then, later, there were the volunteers, like Sydney schoolboy Shane Ullman, who took time out from his family holiday to help in the morgue; or Australian trainee doctors Vijith Vijayasekaran and his wife Priya, who abandoned their holiday to save dozens of blast victims, help set up a network of other volunteers and give crash courses on administering fluids to burn victims.

Hundreds of others did what they could, in some cases actually helping to amputate limbs or peel off burnt skin, in other cases compiling lists of the dead and injured, opening their homes to the families of victims, donating blood, using their language skills to translate, sitting vigil all night with the wounded and traumatised, or telephoning distraught family members back home.

'Your little boy is on his way,' Jill O'Connor from Downtown Apartments told the mother of one young man after he was airlifted out on a Hercules.

'How does he look?' the mother pleaded. 'You have to tell me how he looks.'

'I've only just met him,' Jill replied, 'but apart from a scratch above his eyebrow, he looks exactly as he looked the last time you saw him.'

The mother had burst into tears.

Up in the foothills of central Bali, Janet de Neefe, the Australian owner of the Casa Luna guesthouse and bakery, set up a hotline and an Ubud Relief Disaster Fund. Within hours, money started pouring in from all around the world, from people who

had been to Bali years earlier but had never forgotten the warmth and generosity of the Balinese. Hotels and restaurants began sending food, ice, disinfectant, clean sheets, towels, anything they could lay their hands on for the overflowing and overwhelmed hospitals of Denpasar.

Many of the people coordinating the transport came from the Balinese scooter club who, with their motorbikes and mobile phones, suddenly transformed into modern-day knights in shining armour.

There were outpourings of sympathy and compassion on a grand and, at times, unexpected scale. One journalist I spoke to said he would never forget seeing an Indonesian military intelligence officer crying his eyes out and apologising to his Australian counterparts for what had happened. Many of his colleagues were equally distressed.

'You really saw the potential for humanity at this time,' Judy Chapman, an Australian woman helping out in the hospital crisis centre, told me. 'It made me fall in love with humans again.'

Just before I left Bali I went into the central highlands to speak to the most revered Hindu priest on the island. I wanted to know how the Bali bombings might be understood in spiritual terms.

The eighty-two-year-old man received me in the grounds of what was once the royal temple of the Tabanan dynasty, built 900 years earlier.

'Why do you think this has happened to Bali?' I asked him.  
'Kali Yuga,' he answered simply.

I shook my head. 'What is Kali Yuga?'

He explained through an interpreter that, according to Hindu scriptures, Kali Yuga was the fourth and last stage in the cycle of the world, a time of apocalypse associated with the demon Kali.

'Everything can happen in Kali Yuga,' he said. 'People can blow up nightclubs. Parents can defile their children. Children can kill their parents.'

'When will it end?' I queried him.

'When the world has washed itself clean'.

## 'SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DANCE'?!

I am standing in front of twenty people, most of them strangers, in a large dance pavilion set in the rice paddies of central Bali. I am wearing my underpants, and I am about to perform as the great Russian dancer, Mikhail Nikolaevich Baryshnikov, the explanation for which will become clear shortly.

It is five years since the first Bali bombing, two years since the second wave of terrorist attacks in 2005, and I am on a break from the *Women's Weekly* to attend a week-long writing/yoga retreat that begins each morning at dawn with the roosters badgering us from our beds, then an hour of salutes to the sun followed by a breakfast of tropical fruits and banana pancakes.

After breakfast, with our bodies limbered, our writing coaches, Sarah Armstrong and Alan Close, take us through a series of exercises called 'freewriting' which, as I am soon to discover, means learning to write without stopping; learning to lose control; learning to allow the first thoughts to be the ones you commit to the page; learning not to know where you are going—either in life or on the page.

I'd always stopped and started, backspaced and edited, ruminated endlessly on what was worth saying and what wasn't. Screamed at myself when I couldn't craft a sentence; stewed endlessly over a line or paragraph that felt populated by clichés and old tricks. And here I was being told not just to let it go, but to begin with the following sentence: 'The story I really want to write is ...' And then with no time to hesitate or self-edit, to begin writing:

*The story I really want to write is the story of a lucky man born to unlucky parents in the luckiest of times. My father lost his mother when he was three years old. ‘I have to go now darling,’ she had said to him, and that was his first memory—his mother packing her bags and leaving ...*

And then I was told to stop and to begin with the negative version of the same sentence:

*The story I really don’t want to write ... is the story of my pain and vulnerability and fear and lust and anger and jealousy; the story of my shadow which creeps out of sullen, half-buried corners ... the story of all the things I don’t like about myself, and let’s think ... where to start? Perhaps as a small boy, with being short, although that’s not even coming close to it, is it? But yes, seriously, it’s a good place to start—with being the shortest in the class, although there was one year where I was the second-shortest, but no matter because being the second shortest didn’t make me feel man enough or boy enough and how unoriginal does this sound, you might say, but let me continue because this is a free write, right? And so I think I became in all likelihood more competitive in sport than I would have been had I not been 167. 64 centimetres (okay, 166.37 centimetres, short) ... and what about that match where I pulled off all those try-saving tackles and then cut through the opposing backline to sprint sixty metres for the try-line but was pulled down centimetres short, just on full-time, because the opposing full-back managed to clip my heels in a diving tackle just as I was about to WIN THE GAME, and how I relished my father coming to watch me play, although he wasn’t there that day, or most days actually, because then I would try and win the game single-handedly with little kicks over the opposition’s heads;*

*picking the ball up on the rebound; getting the opposition running in the wrong way with those deft little flick passes and then, in defence, launching myself at a rampaging opponent by taking his feet from under him. So, yes, competing in sport but also competing to be the most defiant, the most insolent ('Leser, get out of this class now and go and tell the headmaster I want you given three of the best,' and that was three straps on the bottom with a bamboo cane) and competing to get my father's attention, but how could I ever compete with the important demands of Vogue magazine and the Lady Potters and Lady Fairfaxes and Lord Kennelworths of this world, and competing to get the girl because if you were the second-shortest in the class and you could get the girl, then that would make you feel like you were ten feet tall in the saddle and then, later in life, wanting to be the best at everything. The best writer. The best lover. The best father. The best husband, the best provider, best son, best brother, best friend. And all this pressure of being the best when of course you know you are anything but the best and yet your father lives by this credo so how can you let him down: 'In this life and in this world, we have to prove ourselves over and over again, each day, each hour ...'*

I wrote a lot more that needed editing that day in Bali about the story I didn't want to write, and it was full of things that were hard to put down on the page then, but even more so now—all the characteristics I disliked in myself that I might have adopted from my father but were truly mine in spades too: all the egotistical, puffed-up, overly ambitious, pontificating, defensive, highly critical, workaholic, judgemental, self-referencing, self-righteous, censorious, dismissive, insecure, selfish bits ... And that was just for starters, because once you disappeared down that kind

of foxhole it was difficult to find your way back, even when you were reminding yourself that all the negative traits had their equal and opposite positive ones too.

But along with this lacerating self-critique was the companion thought that I actually like myself quite a lot and so if I'm having these thoughts then what about every other poor fucker, and let's face it, that's most of humanity—who never grew up with privilege and opportunity; who never had a sense of belonging; who never knew they were loved; who were never told—repeatedly, endlessly—that they were capable of anything; who were never exposed to a world of books and music and interesting people; who were never made to feel anything other than inadequate, abandoned or ashamed?

That was the other thought. If I, the privileged firstborn son of a magazine publisher growing up in the luckiest of homes in the luckiest of countries in the luckiest of times in human history—*Lucky Leser*, one of my friends had even dubbed me—if I had these feelings of inadequacy, then what about everyone else?

Psychology 101, you say? Yes, but then wasn't that the whole point of being alive? Of being conscious? To ask the right questions, not just as a journalist but as a human being? To examine not just other people's dark, cold, self-hating, contradictory, disconnected places, but to examine one's own, given that this was possibly the most uncomfortable inquiry one could ever undertake? To begin to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. To begin to hold opposite sides at the same time, not to rush to one position or another, but to allow disparate ideas to coexist, within ourselves and within others. To begin to know oneself, and to begin to know that we don't know.

Other people's flaws, hell, they were easy to recognise, easy to turn into a blood sport at any social gathering, but what about drilling down into the depths and truth of one's own pain? What about taking the journalist's impulse for burglary and rifling through the drawers of one's own conspicuous shortcomings and strategies, then uttering the unutterable, printing the unprintable *about oneself*? What kind of darkness resided in that inner country and how on earth could we ever sit with someone else's pain if we couldn't begin to touch our own?

Courage comes from the Latin word for heart, *cor*, from the old French word *corage*, meaning 'heart, innermost feelings'. To speak one's mind by telling one's heart.

During my interview with Oriana Fallaci in 1993 she'd said to me: 'Courage and fear are associated.' Mind you, she was referring to the time she was covering the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon and had refused to sit inside the Israeli tank as it was edging towards battle with the Syrians. Instead, she'd perched on the edge of the hatch.

'I know how you die in a tank,' she told me. 'It's the most horrid death. It takes four or five minutes to die and you cook like an omelette ... so I stayed outside, because if I was caught inside I would have cooked slowly. I gained the admiration of everybody for what was an act of fear.'

Now, fourteen years later, I am thinking of Fallaci and courage and bearing witness to other people's hearts, as well as my own, on this, the end of my yoga retreat where I have come to the rather dubious decision to try to impersonate the great Soviet-born dancer and choreographer, Mikhail Baryshnikov.

I have chosen Baryshnikov—as opposed to, say, Quasimodo—because during the yoga retreat I had suddenly remembered that I'd once studied ballet as a five-year-old and that this had been the earliest remembered moment of my childhood humiliation.

For reasons I am now deeply regretting—reasons of candour, self-confession, 'personal growth'—I'd revealed to the group how it was I came to do ballet and how one morning in 1961 this fact was discovered as I was sitting in my first school assembly at Sydney Grammar.

There were 200 other boys in the assembly hall, and because of a conspiracy of factors that must surely deny the existence of a benevolent God, my ballet shoes were sticking out of my school bag. My mother had wanted me to study dance outside of school and that afternoon I would be going to my second class.

I remember the moment as if it were yesterday—the sick-making recognition of approaching doom as the boy next to me pulled the shoes from my bag and then held them aloft to the assembly like he'd just found two little black turds. 'Look,' he said at the top of his voice, his nose scrunched up, 'LESER DOES BALLET.'

Certainly there have been worse humiliations for a five-year-old at an all-boys private school, but I couldn't think of one at the time. All that was in my head was how to torture and maim this devil child while disappearing through a hole in the earth.

Having told the yoga group about this aborted dance career of mine I'd then found myself dubbed 'Baryshnikov' for the entire week, in mock sympathy.

When it had come time, therefore, for each of us to perform, I'd made up a little story about Baryshnikov and I'd assigned the reading of this to Caroline Farrell,

an Australian actress and fellow retreat participant. Her job was to read my words loudly in a Russian accent over the top of the music while I ... danced.

No one knew what I was going to do beforehand so there was an audible gasp as I proceeded to take my shirt and pants off before turning to face the room in my underpants. The gasp turned to shrieks as I scrunched up three tissues and put them inside my underpants to give my balls some Baryshnikovian heft. I then stepped into the middle of the pavilion and begun to dance as Caroline began:

*I am the Great Baryshnikov, Mikhail Fyodor Romanov Baryshnikov, and I have danced for the descendants of the tsars on the great stages of the world. I have been feted by kings and queens, princes, princesses, acolytes and quislings. Plus I have fucked Jessica Lange. Many times. 'Give it to me like a Muscovite, Micky, give it to me,' she said one night. And so, just like in The Postman Always Rings Twice, I threw her down on the kitchen table among the carrots and diced cucumbers and shtooped her. I shtooped her until she came, crying, 'Baryshnikov. The Great Babushka. I'm coming, Babushka, I'm coming.'*

While Caroline read I began with little steps across the stage, some light treads, some strides, then three pirouettes around the pavilion, a high kick, a leap into the air—and as I did so the audience began to fall about with laughter. Naturally, their laughter spurred me on to new feats of lumpen-footed agility and, once started, I couldn't stop—one pirouette followed by another, another leap into the air—and by the time I ended my performance five minutes later my audience was stamping its feet, roaring its approval, wiping its collective eye and here I was bowing towards

them, cheeks flushed with adrenalin and pleasure. I had been waiting for this moment all my life.

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Not long after we arrived in Byron Bay at the beginning of 2000, an old friend living up in the hills had said to me: 'You know people don't move up here to further their careers. They come to access different sides of their personality.'

I liked that idea. I liked the fact that after years of earning a living writing about other people, I could, thanks to the *Women's Weekly*, earn a living writing about other people while at the same time exploring 'the foul rag and bone shop' of my sometimes troubled heart.

I don't think it's a bad idea for a man to do this—to dream, contemplate, reflect and allow himself the time to unlearn and rediscover whatever it is he thinks he might have learnt and discovered, to give over to the exploration of the inner life of his feelings, to the language of his own soul. My guess is most men fear this. Being swallowed up by the swirling contradictions of the heart. Not being in control of one's emotions. Losing one's sense of manhood because that manhood depends on knowing and being right and building systems and being able to rely on powers of reasoning and logic, especially in a world where occupation remains the cornerstone of one's identity.

I can't prove this but I suspect that much of the rage of men, much of the murders, rapes, domestic violence, suicide, alcoholism, sexist language, reckless driving or just plain sullen withdrawal from the world that we hear about every day, is, in part, a flight from the terror of whatever it is we men feel—and that perhaps

true courage is to be found in taking the *via regia*, the royal road, inside ourselves. At least that was to become one of my rationalisations during my years in Byron Bay.

During the same period that the *Women's Weekly* was flying me around the world, I was also taking time out to go down the *via regia*, to search for meaning in other places. And if that meant occasionally dancing like Baryshnikov in Bali and attending a seven-day retreat run by a group called Path of Love, then so much the better.

Before I attended the Path of Love retreat in March 2007 I'd thought that being in Southern Lebanon during the 1982 Israeli invasion or running the gauntlet of Palestinian stone-throwers during the 1987 intifada was as hair-raising as things could get in this charmed life of mine. I'd thought that the incident in the mid-1990s, when media tycoon Theo Skalkos had snapped my cassette in half, smashed my tape recorder on the floor, then lifted me out of my seat and frogmarched me to the lift, throwing me against the back of the lift wall had required a fair bit of nerve-steeling. (Yes, alright, I shouldn't have asked him in the first fifteen minutes whether he'd tried to bump off a colleague in a hit-and-run, or whether he'd deliberately set fire to his offices so he could claim the insurance, but how do you put those kinds of questions delicately?)

Well, let me tell you, those experiences were as nothing compared to the terror I faced during the Path of Love retreat in the hills behind the Gold Coast, where I found myself dancing and screaming and jumping up and down and yelling 'Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!' with people called Rafia, Turiya, Alima, Samved, Satyarthi, Shivamurti, Samopan, Satya and Samovar, and listening to meditations and prayers

from Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (aka Osho), a man once branded ‘the most controversial guru in the world’.

Rajneesh had fled India in the early 1980s and set up a commune in Oregon called Rajneeshpuram, where some in his group—although not the ones I was with on the Gold Coast—would later be accused of waging the largest ever bioterror attack on American citizens. In 1984, in an attempt to gain control of the local Wasco County in Oregon, these followers had allegedly tried to incapacitate the voting population by poisoning it with salmonella bacteria. As many as 750 people were contaminated.

Some of Rajneesh’s top aides had been charged with conspiracy to murder, wiretapping and the poisoning of public officials. Rajneesh himself denied any involvement, but such was his notoriety—he owned ninety-three Rolls Royces and preached open sexuality—that this son of an Indian cloth merchant was deported from America in 1985 on immigration violations. Five years later he died in Pune, India, hopelessly addicted to valium and nitrous oxide, still revered by hundreds of thousands of his disciples, or sanyasins, worldwide.

In 1985 Rajneesh’s spokeswoman, the viper-tongued Ma Anand Sheela, had given an interview to *60 Minutes* in Australia during which reporter Ian Leslie had raised concerns with her about the organisation’s expansion into Western Australia. Ma Sheela, a leading conspirator in the Wasco County poisoning scandal, had responded with this immortal phrase: ‘Tough titties.’

So I grant you, this was not a positive starting point to my relationship with Rajneesh’s organisation, and it wasn’t about to get any better when I realised I was

going to have to stand in a room—photos of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh staring down at me from the wall—and expose myself to a group of strangers.

By expose, I don't mean shedding my clothes once again. I mean shedding the mask of my personality and revealing everything—all the sorrow, shame, guilt, regret, anger, vulnerability and aching and craving I could lay my hands on.

'You must be bloody joking,' I said to no one in particular after the retreat had started. 'There's no way in the world I'm doing that.' And certainly not in front of people I had absolutely nothing in common with, nor any interest in ever getting to know. Why would I do this after some of the negative things they'd said about me when we first started?

I'd been standing in the middle of a horseshoe of twelve people and one guy had accused me of being an actor. He'd said he had no idea if anything I was saying was true. He'd said this unblinkingly, as if he actually knew me. *Fuck him*. The woman next to him had said she couldn't even look at me because, when she did, all she felt was fear. *FEAR? OF ME? Fuck her too*. Another woman had said she loved listening to me speak, but after I'd spoken she wasn't really sure what any of the words meant. *Learn to speak English, bitch*. Then the facilitator, a big German guy with glasses and a Kevin Rudd-like nerdish quality, had told me he thought there was a great sadness inside me. *What would you know, you big burping Kraut?* Another woman had piped up that I was like a guy in a bunny suit desperately wanting to unzip the whole thing and jump out. You know, be the person I really was. The guy next to her had said I was a court jester and then the woman alongside him had offered this pearl of an insight: that my intellect got in the way of who I really was. *Screw her and screw the lot of them*.

Things had gone from bad to worse. In the late afternoon all of us, some sixty people in all, were led into a large room with mattresses spread across the floor. And, yes now I'm thinking exactly what you're thinking: group sex, just like in Pune, India, in the 1970s when Rajneesh was at his height and people fornicated in the ashram in experimental group encounters.

No wonder no one would tell me before I came here what I was in for. All they said was bring a water bottle, comfy clothes, a pair of house shoes, ear plugs, deodorant, mints, vitamins and plenty of courage. What a ruse ...

*So now they are drawing the curtains and turning the music up full blast and closing the doors. We are in a lock-up in the bush and they are putting a blindfold on me. 'No looking at others,' someone with a microphone says, 'just move to the music and feel into your own pain.'*

*What pain? You're the one with the pain, dickhead, not me. My life is fine. No abuse. No ill health. Parents who love me, a wife and two children whom I adore, friends aplenty, a good job, beautiful home. Lucky Leser.*

*Now I'm hearing people crying and shouting. I'm peering under the blindfold. Someone slides it back on my face. 'Just feel into your pain, uncover your wounds,' a man says over the loudspeaker. I think his name is Rafia. 'Feel the urgency. We don't know how long we've got. We're all carrying wounds deep inside us. Exposing one's weaknesses and vulnerabilities creates great fear. Will people still love and respect you if you do?'*

*What a load of shit.*

*Now the person next to me is sobbing. I think it might be that really cute woman. 'Oh my love, oh my love,' she's saying over and over, and I have no idea*

*whether her love is the child or the husband or the mother she might have lost, but the music is pumping and I'm thinking I should try and fake it till I make it because everybody else seems to be wailing and moving to the music, so I start moving but not wailing and trying to peep under my blindfold but all I can hear beyond the deafening noise of Guns N' Roses is the moaning of the woman next to me. 'Oh my love, oh my love,' and in her plaintive cry something starts to happen. I begin hearing the cry of every person who has ever lost someone dear to them, and now I'm starting to think about my daughters and Merran and our friend Neil Roberts who died under a train in Queanbeyan, and my mother, who lost her own father when she was four, and all those relatives who were shot in the Latvian forest after digging their own graves ... Why didn't they take the visas when they could? 'Oh my love, oh my love,' and now my eyes are beginning to smart and there's a band of tightness around my chest and I'm finding it hard to breathe and I think I'm starting to shake and now I'm crying. Fuck these people, they're making me cry. 'Are you happy now?' I scream at the top of my lungs, and my goodness that feels good, so I give it another shot. 'Aghhhhhhhhhhhh.' And I'm crying now. 'Aghhhhhhhhhh.' I'm really crying, and I'm crying for my father and the loss of his mother and stepmother and country, and I'm yelling at the Nazis and the entire German race and I'm crying for my sister Deborah, and all the judgements I've imposed on her in her lifetime and I'm yelling at myself, 'You arsehole, David, you fucking judgemental prick.' And now I'm crying for my brother Daniel, and my daughter Jordan who is lying in my arms—I can see her as a small baby screaming—just as she did the first nineteen months of her life, when nothing could soothe her, not her mother, not me, not the hush of a lullaby—and I'm crying for all the pain she seems to be carrying still in this hard-boiled world of ours.*

*And I'm crying for Hannah and the sweet, tender, stoic nature of her heart and how it will be broken because in every life a heart has to be broken. And now I can't stop. I really can't stop and I have no idea where the tears are coming from because my throat and nose and eyes are a spillway of tears and mucus and I'm howling into the blackness of my blindfold and I'm crying for my wife and all the pain and confusion and sense of imprisonment she seems to have felt for years as a mother and as a wife, my wife, and now I am sobbing for myself and the uncertainty of my marriage and the terror of being on my own and the terror of losing my children and the terror of not sleeping and the terror of travelling because I might not sleep and the terror of not being able to hold things together enough to write my stories and to earn a living and to prove myself the man I think I need to be. And I am crying for the pain of the homeless and the pain of the refugee and the pain of all the broken-hearted souls, and the pain of that poor child who lost her mother last week and the pain of the Croat and the Serb and the Arab and the Jew, and now I'm on the floor and I'm actually hyperventilating and I have absolutely no idea where this tidal wave has come from and the big German guy who looks like Kevin Rudd is holding me in his arms and I'm thinking, Jesus Christ, I'm being held by a man I don't even know and what's worse he's a fucking German whose father might have once loved Hitler's Third Reich and he's rocking me in his arms. Can you believe this? I'm fifty-one years old and I'm blubbering and being rocked on the floor in a room in the hills above the Gold Coast by a German man who may be the son of a Nazi but who in this moment is a just a warm Hun with strong arms and soft brown eyes.*

I saw a lot during those seven days I spent with a group of strangers. I can't tell you now what any of those people did for a living or where they lived, whether their homes were in the countryside or in the city, in an apartment block or a house. I can't tell you about their tastes and hobbies or where they went for their holidays. In most cases I can't even tell you their names, and certainly not their family names, not that I would if I could.

But what I can tell you is how much pain and sorrow I came to see underneath the surface of their personas; how much vulnerability and longing lay just to one side of the face they chose to present to the world.

In the late afternoon one woman lay on the floor, softly moaning into her bitter loneliness. She had moved to a distant city and knew no one there. Her parents were dead and her brother and sister lived far away. She spent her nights alone and often thought of suicide. She had never known the love of a man, and doubted she ever would. She was only thirty-five yet she was as weary of life as a woman three times her age.

I can tell you, too, about one man, probably the same age as me, with the handsome, noble bearing of a sultan, who wept in my arms, neither knowing my name, nor caring to know. I cannot say for sure why he cried but I suspect it was for the many parts of himself that had never been able to cry before. I felt him crying into the dark corners of hurt and anger he had never known existed until now. I felt him shedding tears for all the mistakes he had made, for all the missed loves and lost loves that had slipped through his elegant hands.

In that improbable embrace it seemed to me like he was crying into a well deep enough for all of us to disappear into, and as I peered into it, I could see my own reflection.

## LOST ILLUSIONS

As it turns out, the battlelines were drawn right from the start, although it's much easier to say this, now, twenty-six years later.

I had no real grasp at the time Merran and I married in 1988 that I was marrying a woman of strong feminist principles and that fifteen months after our marriage, with the birth of our first daughter Jordan, the second wave of feminism was going to wash over us.

Merran had ambitions, dreams, skills and sensibilities I hadn't even begun to fathom.

'I hope you realise,' a friend of hers had told me one night, 'that your wife is a visionary. She's light years ahead of her time.' He was talking not just about her brilliant academic background in urban design and town planning but also her passion for—and commitment to—marrying art with architecture, collaborating with architects, engineers and planners, and enhancing the role of artists in the building of better cities.

I hadn't and I didn't and it took me a long time to fully appreciate the depth of this truth and how my own lack of spatial intelligence, in combination with my male biases (read blindness), prevented me from seeing what I needed to see.

The French have an expression for this. *Tout est au commencement*. Everything is at the beginning, if we care to look. Neither of us had cared to look when we had our first argument in Jerusalem in 1987. From memory it must have been a Sunday afternoon. Church bells pealing. A golden light fading over the Mount of Olives into the Garden of Gethsemane. The cool of the desert whispering through

pine needles. It was my favourite time of day in the Holy City. The half-light that contained both the dying flare of midday and the approaching veil of night. Both an exultation and a lament. This was to be our first lament.

'What shall we do for dinner tonight?' Merran asked.

'I was just going to do something easy,' I replied. 'Get a couple of schnitzels from the supermarket, heat them up, a bit of salad, something like that.'

'Why don't we cook something?'

'Look, I'd really like to get this story done tonight. The *South China Morning Post* wants it by tomorrow morning. Can't we just go the schnitzel route?'

'We haven't prepared a meal together since I got here.'

'I know, because I've been working, and normally when I'm working I just get myself something simple and then go back to my desk.'

'Well, don't you think we could be a bit more creative?'

'I'm trying to be creative here and get this story done. Why don't you cook something, seeing as I'm working and you're not?'

'Because I think we should share these tasks.'

'But you want a proper meal and I've been getting by here on my own just doing the simple dinner thing, so seeing as you're not working and I am, wouldn't that be a supportive thing to do?'

'It might be supportive but it's not collaborative and I think we should be collaborative about these things. I don't want to fall into the traditional role of chief cook and bottle washer.'

'Yes, but if I'd joined you in Vancouver when you were living there and I wasn't working and you were I wouldn't have minded cooking for you, even though I can't cook half as well.'

'Well, I don't know that you would have. I think you would have wanted to assert your independence too.'

And so it went, back and forth, for the next hour or so, until we fell into sullen silence. Perhaps we ended up eating schnitzel that night or perhaps Merran capitulated and cooked in the kitchen, I can't remember. What I do remember, though, is the feeling that seized me at the time, but which I chose to shut out as quickly as I could—that some kind of crack had just appeared in our relationship; the portent of something to come.

Did I see that this was the stirring of a gender war, a huge political story played out in the kitchen, living room and bedroom of a late twentieth-century couple's relationship? No. Did I want to see that? Absolutely not. I had other political questions on my mind. My story on the latest American peace plan for the Middle East was lying half-written on my desk with a deadline looming. US Secretary of State George Schultz had just arrived in town, and the Palestinians were growing restless. The future of the Middle East was being framed while the schnitzels were defrosting. Yes, I think we did have schnitzel, but with a beautiful vegetable dish that Merran made. The perfect compromise.

In bed, later that night, we signed our own Camp David Accords with soft kisses and gentle declarations of love before awakening to a crisp dawn and the first rumblings of the Palestinian uprising.

What I can see now, though, is that in the early years of our marriage I had a lot to learn about honouring my wife's work and passion, not to mention understanding the ways in which she would help to create—and hold up—the platform from which I could launch myself at the world. Each morning I woke with that great, biting urge to push forward, to write about big, hemispheric ideas, but failed to see in the smaller, more incremental things how a family, how a couple, held itself together.

Part of the problem was that I'd never been a domesticated man. For most of my life, in fact, I'd grown up in the care of housekeepers—women like 'Aunty' Julie or 'Aunty' Marietta or 'Aunty' Heather: European immigrants who, in return for a new home in a new land, would cook, wash and clean.

In my Jewish mother's fridge, meats, chickens and cheeses would sit on the shelves for weeks at a time, squeezed behind the gherkins, gefilte fish, herrings, eggs, sour cream, bags of salmon patties and wilting lettuce, slowly turning rotten. My mother's storage system often looked like a freshly abandoned village in the heat of battle—cow pens smoking, chicken runs overflowing, dairy bails groaning under the pressure of bursting udders.

By comparison Merran's mother's kitchen was a text-book study in middle-class industrial efficiency, a disciplined, well-oiled operation where everyone had their assigned task and no one could shirk their responsibilities at the expense of the good governance of the family. And in the midst of all this, a buzz of merriment and good-humoured industry.

If you looked into Jeanne Morrison's deep freeze you would find pre-cooked meals that had been prepared weeks, possibly months, earlier in a whirlwind of

culinary adventurism. The deeper you went into the frozen bowels of the freezer, the more you learnt about what had gone on during another time in epicurean history. A chicken curry from the Palaeolithic era. A steak and kidney pie and chocolate mousse covered with Mesolithic ice. Gravies that had once been desserts winking from an interglacial period.

By contrast, unless my mother was cooking alone, or the housekeeper was doing it for us, my family kitchen always seemed mired in bungling discord, although the results were usually a triumph of taste over method. Somehow my sister, mother and grandmother would turn a simple meal into a conference of Versailles, or a Balkan stew, separating into different warring enclaves. Croatia cutting the potatoes; Serbia carving the chicken; Montenegro smouldering beside the sink.

I'm sure to them it was a way of communicating, but to me there was far too much Jewish matriarchal energy in the room for anyone's good. It left me desperate for clear Protestant air where gravies miraculously transformed into desserts, where sisters and mothers came together in a spirit of uncomplicated free enterprise. No terror of not having enough. No ghosts of Jewish ghettos. No meats turning green under the couch, stashed there in case the knock at the door came in the middle of the night.

No one gave me the manual for domestic competence or for love in the post-feminist age. No one warned me about how love and ardour can die on the Cross of Resentment. No one prepared me for the fact that marriage was going to test all Merran and I had by taking us to the barricades and beyond. Germaine Greer once said the real theatre of the sex war was the domestic hearth. I had no experience of this, unless, of course, you count the books you've read as experience.

For my parents there was no war, just the traditional cooperation, or *compliance*, of a woman putting her husband's interests ahead of her own, and suppressing her own talents in the process.

In my parents' apartment, to this day a testament to their neat domestic arrangement, is woven into two little cushions placed on their respective pillows. My mother's reads: 'My family tree is full of nuts.' My father's: 'It ain't easy being king.' The truth of the matter, however, was—and is—that it was never difficult for my father to be king, and my mother's family tree was never full of nuts. Quite the contrary.

My mother's mother, Hansey Eizenberg, was a concert pianist. Her English-born grandfather, David Eizenberg, was a violinist taught by Czech maestro Jan Kubelík, and requested by Dame Nellie Melba to play her obbligatos whenever she toured Australia.

My mother's father, Bert Davis Klippel, was the son of Polish-born music publisher David Davis Klippel who, at the turn of the twentieth century, set up a music-publishing business with the legendary Frank Albert. Together these two inspirational figures in the Australian entertainment industry purchased the lucrative copyright to the works of some of New York's top Tin Pan Alley songwriters, among them Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. My grandfather took over the running of this business from his father and also set up Brunswick Records, the first company to press a gramophone record in Australia—of Leopold Godowsky playing his own composition 'Alt Wien'—in 1927.

In their capacity as music publishers and record producers, my maternal grandparents had entertained some of the world's greatest artists—among them

the Gershwin brothers, Yehudi Menuhin, Sarah Bernhardt, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Leopold Godowsky. They'd employed cooks, maids, chauffeurs, gardeners and laundresses. They'd each owned a speedboat which they raced regularly on Pittwater. They'd thrown elaborate first-night parties on board yachts on Sydney Harbour and at the Basin on the Hawkesbury River, where they employed a young out-of-work actor by the name of Errol Flynn.

Music coursed and quivered, therefore, through my mother's bones. She played it from the time she was five years old. She read music. She tapped notes and rhythms on her legs in idle moments. She knew almost the entire repertoire of Chopin. She studied at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music for five years under Frank Hutchens and even, for a short time, wrote about it as a budding music critic for the *Jewish News* before marrying my father in 1952.

My father's family name, Leser, was German for reader, but my mother was equally bookish, and for every biography of Churchill, Hitler and Roosevelt, or every history of World War II that my father had devoured—and there were literally hundreds—my mother matched with the works of Proust, Flaubert, Virginia Woolf, Anthony Trollope and dozens of other great writers of fiction.

When I was a child, my mother worked for Davis Publications, the wholesale book company my grandmother ran after the music-publishing business was sold to Allens in the late 1940s. She would haul books around the city in the back of her Holden station wagon. Golden books, Sunset books, books on travel, books too numerous and too heavy for a woman to be carting around the city, bookstore to bookstore.

She would return home in the late afternoon, take to her bed, draw the curtains and then lie there for hours, a cold compress folded across her forehead, her neck and back aching, before my father would return from work to rouse her with his demands.

'Where are my shirts? Why hasn't my suit been pressed? Can't you be on time for once? Don't you know how important this is to me? We simply cannot be late.'

'Not those people again, Bern,' my mother would say. 'Who'll be there? Can't I stay home? I don't feel well. Bern, I don't feel well.'

My father, however, never for a moment seemed to consider my mother's aims and ambitions equal to his own, probably because my mother had few ambitions of her own that she could recognise. My father was a man of his generation and my mother a woman of hers, and over the course of sixty-two years (at the time of writing)—through six decades of real and unreal expectations, exasperation, communication, miscommunication, exhilaration and intense, heartfelt collaboration—they have managed to sustain a life together so they found it just about impossible to understand their daughter-in-law's position, not just because their son was born of their blood and bones but also because they found the political contest that Merran and I became engaged in so foreign to them.

'Do you think you'd be able to shop and prepare a meal tonight?' Merran asked me one day when I was working from home.

'I'm not sure. I've got to finish this story.'

'You haven't cooked a meal in weeks.'

'I know. I've been snowed under.'

'So have I.'

'I know.'

'So when are you going to cook a meal?'

'When I've finished the story.'

'When will that be?'

'Soon.'

'How soon?'

'Possibly tomorrow.'

'Or the day after?'

'Could be. Not sure.'

Neither Merran nor I anticipated the turf war of marriage. Competing careers, colliding ambitions, children who needed love and attention. We didn't bargain on the exhaustion, the ill feeling, the loss of self. And it didn't help, either, that we had few, if any, role models to help guide us through these treacherous waters.

In my own case, even though my father had been honoured in New York by the American Jewish Committee for his promotion of human relations, even though he had constantly promoted and supported women coming up through the ranks of Condé Nast, even though he believed women had as much right to work as men did, he was still a man of his generation, deaf to the howl of feminist unrest at home, and possessed of a relentless, driving ambition beyond the home. That's how self-made men made themselves.

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No one warns you when you come to Paris just what the northern skies might do to a marriage, how the bitter winds from across the Seine can snap-freeze the love or, at the very least, put it on ice. That's not at all what the travel brochures suggest.

It was February 2008 and this was meant to be the trip of a lifetime. Jordan had just completed her last year of school in triumph—dux of Byron Bay High—and was travelling through Europe for six months while her younger sister, Hannah, was enrolled for a term at the International School of Paris on Rue Beethoven in the sixteenth arrondissement.

We'd been living in Byron for eight years. Merran was in between jobs, although with two strong job prospects beckoning; I still had my well-paid job with the *Weekly* and it felt like time for a change, time to create something new, time to give ourselves a dose of not just any city in the world, but the crème de la crème of cities.

Jordan was by now launched on a career path as a singer-songwriter. She'd begun playing piano at the age of five and had written her first song at thirteen, a sweet aching tune called 'Curiosity', which she'd come to hate and which I was always badgering her to play. At the age of fifteen she'd come to the attention of Murray Burns, keyboardist with New Zealand rock band Mi-Sex, who lived and worked in the hills above Byron Bay, and who loved to foster young talent.

Jordan became one of Murray's musical projects—and friends—until she moved to Sydney and was taken up by Rob Hirst and Jim Moginie, two men whom she'd first heard as a babe in my arms, dancing in our living room to the sounds of Midnight Oil's 'Blue Sky Mining'. They would become the producers of her first EP.

Jordan's wisdom and empathy had always astounded me, and they came out through her words and music—songs of such depth it was hard to know where her grace notes rose from; almost certainly from her matriarchal line, but also from wherever the great mystery of song lurks.

Jordan might have cried for the first nineteen months of her life but she could practically talk under water. By the time she was two years old she possessed a vocabulary of more than 300 words, many of them orders that she would issue from her crib, like, 'Use two hands,' when I once had the temerity to cover her with a blanket using just one hand.

By contrast, her sister Hannah had been born with the most adoring—and adorable—disposition, a shock of blonde curls and a smile to melt the icecaps. Her first words were 'thank you' and from the very beginning she was an angel at our table and in our arms. From the age of two she addressed adults by their first name and smiled at strangers in the street. 'Hello, Sue,' she would cry out to one of our friends whenever she saw her. Fancy that. A two-year-old addressing an adult with that kind of self-possession.

After the difficult birth of her elder sister, after nineteen months of her sister's continual wailing, this younger daughter of ours had ushered into our lives something sweet and magical. She was a warm bundle of love who nestled in the crook of our necks to coo and gurgle with contented delight.

For her mother this had been nothing short of a miracle: this beautiful blue-eyed creature who found peace and refuge in her arms, who didn't push and pull from her embrace as her sister had done, but responded with all the ardour of a cub to her lioness. As she'd grown into a teenager, she'd become more of everything to

all who knew her: more beautiful, more authentic, more accepting; more talented as an actress, designer and photographer; more composed, more consoling to those in trouble, more like her mother and more like a messenger, in fact, from a divine corner of the universe than merely our own flesh and blood.

You watch your daughters swell in their mother's belly, and you take soundings of them in utero, the first flutterings, stretches and wiggles. You rock them through their restless nights in the fog of your own exhaustion. You wake, not to the crack of thunder outside, but to the barely audible stirrings of your child in the room next door. You steel yourself through the endless soiled nappies, sweet odours at first, before they turn into something more threatening. You watch them take their first faltering steps with the same fascination you might have once followed your favourite football team. Every step a giant leap for womankind.

You watch them walk through the school gates for the first time, wearing their newly pressed tunics and shiny shoes, clutching their little school bags, and you watch with heart in mouth behind a tree, out of sight, to see if another child might come and talk to them. You bring them home when they're sick, tuck them into bed, make them soup, read them stories, stroke their backs, sing them soft lullabies in the late afternoon.

You watch your older daughter learning to dance, parallel knee bends, combination kicks and swivels, jazz runs and pivot steps; and your younger daughter turning up at the tennis court, all dressed in pink, barely as high as the net, then cracking two-handed backhands down the line to become the little tennis queen of her town.

You come home to find ‘to the moon and back’ love letters and poems from your daughters and lists like this one from Hannah who, even at age ten, knew the joys of ticking off her accomplishments:

1 Eat.

2 Finish my book.

3 Have a bite to eat.

4 Watch a movie (it’s the weekend!).

5 Try and have a sleep.

5(a) Talk to Dad.

6 Download songs.

6(a) Talk to Mum.

7 Say hi to Jordan.

8 Have dinner.

9 Watch *Home and Away*.

10 Maybe watch *The Simpsons*.

11 Read more.

12 Go to bed.

P.S. To myself. Always have a drink of water with me.

You know—because you’ve played the horror tape in your head since they first emerged, head or bottom first, into the world—what it would do to your own life if anything were to happen to them. You know what you would do to anyone who harmed them. You know the joy that comes from seeing them happy in their skins,

their homes, their schools, among their friends, discovering their passions, fulfilling their promise.

You hear of men who have walked away from their children when their marriages have broken down and you want to shake them from their apathy, indifference or fear—I’m not sure which—to remind them what a gift they have in their own children.

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I’m not certain when things began to unravel. I think it was about four weeks after we arrived in Paris. I saw, just in the space of those few weeks, the seasons shift in our bedroom. Winter thawed into spring and the cherry blossoms began to bloom. The lemons in our garden were growing fatter by the day and the lifeless swarm of twisted vines covering the giant wall of our courtyard were now a mass of red and green. This was good, this turning of the weather, I thought. It might save our marriage yet.

Not long before this Merran and I had sat in bed together in the gathering gloom of late winter. It was the eve of our twentieth wedding anniversary—31 March—and the bells of the city were reverberating softly on the cobbled streets and flagstones. It was not far-fetched to wonder whether they were crying for us, although we’d done a fair bit of that ourselves on that very day, and in the frigid weeks leading up to it. One melancholy chime after another, easing us from winter into spring.

One morning I saw an army of people wheeling towards that great confluence of boulevards in the east of the city known as the Place de la République. From six different directions they came in their thousands, the greatest assemblage

of twisted limbs and rolling chairs I'd ever seen. It was bitterly cold and as I stood on that avenue of bare plane trees leading towards the famed square—with all those gleaming statues and dates marking the glories of the French Republic—I felt ashamed for my own creeping sadness, especially when measured against the great well of suffering: the beggars with their hands raised in supplication in the piss- and spit-stained metros; all the lonely, dark-eyed women who bought their tins of tuna and their bottles of cheap Côte de Nuits wine before returning to their bedsits to pass the night alone.

Love, I suppose, is constantly shifting. One day everything looks possible, the next day it feels like the end of the line. You notice all the things that divide you rather than all the things that might keep you on track. You notice—because you can see the stark evidence etched into your wife's face—that she never really wanted to be here in this city, that it was you carrying the dream of Paris all along, foisting it, unwittingly, on your family. You realise that she would have preferred Spain or, better still, somewhere new, and how you are always hankering—interminably, so it would appear—for the same old places.

You notice, too, that she is always looking at art and architecture while you are still banging on about people and all their curious ways. She hates the cold. You prefer it now to the cloying heat of the subtropics. She likes Balzac. You prefer Hugo. She wants to cross the road where and when it suits her—in this case as you're still getting your bearings on Boulevard du Palais. You'd rather she wait till you've sized up where it is you're actually going, so that you can cross the road together.

At the time of our Paris sojourn Merran was a fifty-one-year-old woman going through menopause. I was a fifty-two-year-old man most probably having

another mid-life crisis. She wanted to work. I wanted to put my brain in a jar. She had ambitions that had never been fulfilled. I had ambitions that were probably best shelved. She felt invisible. I sometimes felt too visible for my own good. She slept like a log. I still lay awake for hours. She slept in one bed. I slept in another.

Is that what happens to marriage after twenty years? Different beds and a preference for Balzac or Hugo?

All through our time in Paris I thought she would leave. Leave this life we'd dreamt about—*I'd dreamt about*—for many years, ever since I'd first arrived in Paris as a twenty-one-year-old backpacker. Perhaps she'd go to Barcelona and study Spanish for a few weeks, or take a side trip to a sculpture park in Germany, en route back to Australia to spend some time alone, to see what it truly felt like to be without the family she adored but who weighed her down. No, let me rephrase that. I think she just needed to get away from me.

'Do you want to go home?' I said to her one day.

'Maybe,' she replied.

'You can.'

'I know.'

'So go.'

'I might.'

All the things that Merran no longer loved in me. All that vaulting ambition, that thrusting forward, that certitude. All the prerogatives of being a male, of being born to affluence, of being the firstborn Jewish son, of being imbued with a sense that the world was going to look after me because I had a special place in it.

That was something girls from Hunters Hill were never made to feel about themselves, certainly not in a family of five daughters. And then, of course, there was the fact of my being a journalist in the age of media. It was a recipe for self-absorption, for walking around night and day with stories and profiles and the conflicting claims of ideas and people rattling around in your head.

'There's only room in this marriage for one of us to work full-time,' she'd said to me one evening in Sydney shortly before we moved to Byron Bay. She'd come home early from work to find our daughter in hysterics in the arms of a new au pair, the house in a mess, me still in my home office, and nothing ready for dinner. I think it was a champagne glass, although it could have been a tumbler of vodka, that she threw across the living room as she said it.

I didn't take all that in properly, just what kind of a death knell she was sounding on her own professional ambitions, although the bull's-eye shot from the couch should have told me. I was too full of my own stress and fatigue to notice, not to mention my own deeply held—but unstated—view that this was part of the natural order of things: for me to be the breadwinner, the provider, the protector of the hearth. Besides, by the time we were married, I was being paid more to do what I believed—again secretly—was a more important job. And a full-time one at that, because what newsroom would ever have viewed favourably a request to work part-time in order to establish equality at home?

And, of course, according to an old, primitive tape playing in my head, her work was not as important as informing the public and challenging authority and asking important questions and setting agendas and PROVING TO MYSELF AND MY

FATHER AND THE WORLD AT LARGE THAT I HAD NOT SQUANDERED MY BIRTHRIGHT  
TO BECOME A HOUSE HUSBAND!

For years I didn't see how my ambitions—and the relative success that flowed from them—overwhelmed the woman I loved, and how these resentments began to collect like grains of sand in a shoe, barely noticeable at first, easily emptied, but over time accumulating in such a way as to make walking a little problematic.

Merran and I never managed to disengage from this battle, perhaps because it was written into our script from the very start. Merran had so many strings to her bow that at times it was impossible to say what she did—and where her target was—because she did everything so well.

What she didn't do so well was adjust to the idea that she would have to forsake many of her passions and skills for the hard grind of motherhood. That makes it sound like she didn't love our daughters with a fierce devotion. She did, and does. But she didn't accept being a mother as the full realisation of who she was, and what she was meant to be or do. It was a good part of it, but by no means all.

At our best I made Merran feel more beautiful than she'd ever felt before—her words, not mine—and she made me feel tall and handsome, even though I was short and increasingly bald. I also made her feel more intelligent than she'd ever felt before—a surprise to me given that I always thought her way more intelligent than me, and certainly way more accomplished.

We loved the same people, mostly, and the same books, until Balzac and Hugo began asserting themselves. We enjoyed the same movies and celebrated the same music. She could sing Leonard Cohen's songs long before most people had

even heard of the Canadian poet, let alone turned him into the cult figure he is today.

She knew the fugitive touch of Keith Jarrett's piano-playing and the chameleon charms and voice of the Thin White Duke, David Bowie.

There was so much we shared. We were good for each other, until we weren't, until it became apparent that I would never be domesticated enough, that I would never cook enough or clean enough, or have eyes enough to see what needed doing around the house; that according to her own mother's code of keeping house, it could never be enough because a day's work was never done until the kitchen was cleaned and the light bulbs changed and the garden weeded and the laundry washed and folded and the children's homework supervised. And that beyond all this there was my ambition still bubbling away, still dimming her light while mine shone—in her eyes—way too brightly for my own good, let alone hers.

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In the months of our Paris deep freeze I went to interview Germaine Greer for the *Weekly* in her lair in the English countryside. When I arrived there were white doves fluttering above the stone cottage and Germaine was picking sweet peas in her garden—a posy of soft, fragrant colours arranged in her weathered hands. It was a good omen, gentle and benign, but as I soon discovered, a cunning deception on the part of Nature and Woman.

Once inside her house, she'd slouched against her rustic kitchen island like a gunslinger at rest, legs spread, one foot up on a bench and a look on her face that alternated between good-natured tolerance and shoot-'em-dead disdain. The freshly picked sweet peas floated beside us in a bowl of water.

I'd been in training for this moment for thirty years—primed by the hundreds of interviews that had come before it, but, more importantly, by twenty years of marriage to Merran.

How could a man from the post-war baby boomer generation contemplate marriage and not consider some of the propositions first raised by Greer in *The Female Eunuch*—that marriage was slavery, that a full bosom was a ‘millstone’ around a woman’s neck; that most men hated women at least some of the time, and that a woman’s essential quality (was) one of ‘castratedness’.

I didn’t agree with all of it, but there was enough in Greer’s excoriating prose to force me to examine some of the ways in which women had been oppressed over centuries. And I believed I’d taken up the challenge and retrained myself. I’d learnt to cook (a limited repertoire, I grant you) and to vacuum the living room (sometimes naked for that va-va-voom feeling); I kept the kitchen clean (in fact, I think I got a little obsessive about bench-wiping); I washed up after dinner; I tried to remember to shop more; and I worked from home for the better part of twenty years so that I could be with my daughters before and after school.

But the balance was still lopsided. Sometimes I would be away on assignment for two to three weeks at a time, leaving Merran to juggle the unending demands of home life—shopping, cooking, the girls’ homework, bills, house maintenance, the garden—while still managing her own career, and sometimes necessary travel—as a public-art consultant, curator and project manager. Even when I was home the lion’s share of those tasks would invariably fall to her because for me to think and to write in the way I needed to meant not thinking about the other things I needed to think

about—the things Merran wanted me to think about, the things many women want men to think about.

Albert Einstein once said—and Merran was fond of quoting this—that ‘men marry women with the hope they will never change (while) women marry men with the hope they will change. Invariably they are both disappointed’.

Many of my best friends were women. My editors, after those dark Murdoch days, were all women. The stories I wrote were increasingly about strong, brave, redoubtable, often unsung women who worked in the arts, politics, medicine, psychology, fashion and business.

I’d worked for Dr Anne Summers, one of the country’s leading feminist authors, during her days as editor of *Good Weekend*, as well as Shona Martyn and Summers’ successor at the magazine, Fenella Souter—all three of them large-brained and sharp-tongued, and as disinclined to tolerate conventional male thinking as Germaine Greer was ever likely to shy away from a scrap.

With Germaine Greer the challenge was just to survive. Even before I made the trip across the English Channel from Paris to interview her in the middle of 2008, I knew that no amount of research was going to equip me for an intellectual joust with the most outspoken feminist of her generation. She knew too much, thought too deeply (most of the time) and, for over four decades, had been speaking and writing on too many subjects—sex, politics, menopause, women painters, teenage boys, Aboriginal Australia, Shakespeare’s wife, even the merits of football and Posh Spice—for me to imagine that I could ever properly do her justice.

So for three and a half hours in her country home we’d talked about her biographer, Christine Wallace, whom she described as a ‘flesh-eating bacterium

rolling around in her own excrement'; Richard Neville and his claims—false, she said—that she'd had a hysterectomy ('Who did it? A vet?'); her three-week marriage to Australian journalist Paul du Feu in 1968, during which time she'd managed to enjoy at least seven trysts ('I was not allowed to sleep in the bed with him on my wedding night. He made me sleep in the armchair. He was drunk and he was a nasty drunk.').

We talked about her alleged promiscuity—false again, she said—and the fact that she'd been proposed to by the same man a number of times over the previous decade. (Was she considering it? 'Absolutely not. I'd be more likely to marry my dog.')

We discussed motherhood and whether there were regrets over not being able to have children. ('I gave it my best shot. It didn't work. End of story. I don't know why Australians pretend [having a child] is a one-way ticket to fulfilment, because it isn't. I've watched my friends have children and I've never seen them suffer more than through their children. Either their children were ill or in trouble. Nightmare. Just endless agony.')

The closest Greer came to verging on the vulnerable was when she talked about her father, whom she'd written about in her book, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*. She'd gone in search of this man because, as she wrote: 'Daddy never once hugged me. If I put my arms around him, he would grimace. I clung to the faith that he did not really find me repulsive ... If he had let me under his guard, I should have crept into his heart and found the wound there.'

As she'd delved deeper into her father's story she'd discovered, to her eternal relief, that she was not 'congenitally unlovable'; that, in fact, her father

adored her. It was just that the war and his generation of men had left him incapable of showing it.

'That's why I started to write *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*,' she told me. 'Because I was one of a generation of children whose fathers were literally speechless, who thought if they allowed anyone in closer, all the horror and fear and self-doubt that the war had engendered in them would just overwhelm them. So they were a silent generation.'

Greer's face softened during this exchange and the gunslinger glower melted away. At the end of our meeting I gave her a small gift of two jars of French jam which I'd bought in Paris before leaving. The vulnerability vanished and she said sniffily, 'Jam? I've got plum trees all over the place.' She then read the label on the jam and exclaimed, 'Jam from France? You mean you didn't even make it yourself?'

And this from the woman who hadn't even offered me a cup of tea.

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In the years leading up to our Paris meltdown I interviewed June Newton, Helmut's widow. We talked about her marriage to one of the world's greatest photographers. There'd been many affairs in the Newton marriage—most memorably, in the early days, between Helmut and Maggie Tabberer—but June insisted no affair would ever have split them up.

'We never had an understanding,' June said. 'I would never have lived with a person where you had to have an understanding. If things happen, well ... this marvellous French philosopher once said: "For the perfect harmony and happiness, learn how to let the wind blow freely between the cypress and the oak." (The quote actually came from Kahlil Gibran.)

Unfortunately, by the time Merran and I arrived in Paris in 2008 the winds had stopped blowing freely.

One afternoon we carried the awful weight of our undoing into Joël Robuchon's famed eatery off Rue du Bac. No sooner did we sit down than we started arguing and then crying into our foie gras and scallop carpaccio. We stared forlornly at the chestnut cream soup that followed, sat in funereal silence through the *assiettes* of *ris de veau* and *agneau de lait*, and then wept some more as the passionfruit soufflé arrived, before finally stumbling out into the gloaming and back to our apartment. As I lay in bed that night I realised for the first time that our marriage might well and truly be over.

The international economy looked finished as well. By the time Hannah was completing her school term at the end of June 2008, Bear Stearns, the New York-based global investment bank, had just collapsed and the US government was only a few months away from bailing out the government-sponsored enterprises Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Lehman Brothers, the once venerable institution, was about to file for bankruptcy. The financial world was falling off a cliff and, with it, went my contract with the *Australian Women's Weekly*, not to mention tens of millions of other jobs around the world.

At the beginning of July, Hannah and Merran returned to Australia while Jordan went on to Belgium, Holland and Hungary for a series of music festivals.

I'm not sure how much of their parents' distress our daughters saw, let alone understood. Jordan was travelling with old friends from Byron, free from school worries for the first time in her life. Hannah had been making new friends from around the world, travelling all over Paris by metro, speaking a little French,

shopping at Le Bon Marché and Galeries Lafayette, going to alcohol-free nightclubs in the first arrondissement.

I saw them all off on the same day and then returned to the emptiness of our apartment and the knowledge that Merran and I were no longer the couple we'd been when we arrived. We no longer laughed together. We no longer imagined the same future. Those five months in the fourth arrondissement had been the beginning of the end, although it would take another sixteen months for that end to arrive.

'I know her so well,' Gabriel Garcia Márquez once said of his wife, 'that she is completely unknown to me.'

## THE SILENCE OF AN UNBORN LIFE

There were times as a little boy when I used to pray—small supplications to keep my father safe as he travelled, to stop him heaving each morning before work, for my mother's migraines to disappear, for Margot Adams to kiss me after Sunday school, for Bradley Pollack to stop beating me up at school. Some of these prayers had been answered—Margot Adams kissed me more than once, and Bradley Pollack and I became friends—but my father never stopped being sick before work and my mother's headaches and viruses never left her.

On Friday nights I used to sing the Jewish prayers at our family Sabbath dinner and while I knew these were prayers of gratitude for the bread of the earth and the fruit of the vine, I knew that any all-seeing, all-knowing God could see the imposter at our table. My prayers were perfunctory, and never ever did the curiosity about, or wonder of, something bigger or deeper stir inside me.

Even in Jerusalem, where I had spent so much time over two decades, the devotions and entreaties of the faithful spoke less to me about whatever God might mean, and more about the pain of the world and the pain of separation: the Jewish children of Abraham keening on one side of the Temple Mount, while on the other side their cousins, the Muslim children of Abraham, supplicating before the same God but bowing towards a distant holy city. Not just separate but implacably opposed to each other, calling at various times for each other's expulsion and destruction. And then a few hundred metres away, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the various Christian faiths and sects—Greek Orthodox, Armenian

Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Ethiopian and Syriac Orthodox alike—waged their own bitter, centuries-old struggle for the right to control access to the place where Jesus was crucified.

What was prayer time if not a mighty battle of the sounds? The call from the minarets, the chanting of rabbis, the ringing of church bells, and all of them competing with one another for supremacy.

In the twelve months after our return from Paris I began to do a lot of praying. I prayed that my wife would feel the burden of our marriage lifting and that for what remained of my parents' lives they would find peace of mind. I prayed for my daughters' happiness and good health and sense of purpose and that I, their father, would always be part of their lives; that I, too, might grow old enough—just as my parents had—to know my children as adults.

But I'd learnt something at the Path of Love retreat in 2007 that had nothing to do with prayer being about reaching an accord with a deity, or petitioning an invisible God for favours. It had more to do with the idea of gratitude. Gratitude for the gift and preciousness of this life; gratitude for our good health, and the fragile contingency on which this has always been based; for the music you might hear because you have ears to hear it; for the wild invitation of nature because you have eyes to see it. Gratitude for the harvest of this ordinary day, this house, this food, these friends, these children, this conversation. Gratitude for the happiness that resides in the commonplace and the humdrum—in the *tableau vivant*—in the boil of a kettle, in the ferrying of children back and forth from school, in the preparation of a meal, in the ticking of the grandfather clock, in the prize of your own vigour and strength. Such is the terrible beauty of life that from one moment to the next,

everything can alter, anything can happen to you or your loved ones, and that this might bring with it the greatest blessing or the greatest devastation. William Butler Yeats knew this from the deepest depths of his melancholy Irish bones.

Come away, O human child!

To the waters and the wild

With a faery, hand in hand,

For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

In August 2009, a year after our return from Paris, Hannah's fifteen-year-old friend Jai Morcom was killed in a schoolyard brawl at Mullumbimby High after suffering massive head injuries. The community reeled with shock and grief, and my daughter entered Yeats's weeping world, as did all who knew Jai. 'He was a beautiful boy,' his father, Steve Drummond, said after the inquest found that his son had not been bashed to death. 'He just walked into school one day and never walked out.'

A month later, my oldest friend, David Ashley Wilson, passed away at the age of eighty-four. I had met him when I was five and he was thirty-five. He had become my best friend, although he had started out—and remained until his death—my father's best friend too.

I had loved David Ashley Wilson from the moment we'd met, from the moment I'd first sat on his knee and he'd given me the gift of his curiosity and interest. Did I like my school? What was I good at? What did I want to be when I grew up? Did I like girls? (Ooooh, yuk, I said. Give it time, he replied with a gleam in his eye.)

We'd had a lifetime of conversations, in person and on the telephone, across deserts and oceans and through swamps and bayous, from Sydney, Melbourne, New

Orleans, Washington, Jerusalem and Byron Bay, discussing the state of the world and the state of our hearts—mine much more than his—exploring all the intellectual and emotional regions that were surprisingly available to two men of such contrasting ages.

I'm not quite sure how to describe the love we ended up feeling for each other because the English language doesn't seem to do this kind of love much justice. Perhaps the Greeks express it better with words like *agapi* or *philia*. Words that describe the love a young boy might come to feel for an older man, one that continued right up to when the young boy was fifty-three and the old man was eighty-four, shrunken and soured by the great crossing he was about to take.

I adored this man. He was an ex-boxer, gardener and tradesman, but he was also a historian and teacher, well versed in the affairs of Europe, the Middle East and China, enthralled by nature and animals, full of wild and wonderful contradictions, so utterly human in his contradictions that he showed me how it was possible to be complete not because of one's strengths, but because of one's weaknesses.

I knew his weaknesses because he confided them to me. I knew how deeply insecure he had been all his life, how shy and mistrustful of people he was, how his father had beaten him and never, ever let the word 'love' pass from his lips—especially in relation to his son—and this despite his father having been a priest with a sizeable congregation in rural Australia.

David hated religion and scorned the idea of a deity or higher power, but would always sign off his phone conversations: 'God bless you.'

And here I was flying to Sydney for one last communion with my oldest friend.

'You know what today is, don't you?' he said feebly as I entered his bedroom in the nursing home.

'No—what day is that?' I asked.

'It's the day I die.'

'Are you ready for this?' I said, taking his hand and stroking his forehead.

'Yes, I am,' he replied.

'Is there anything you wish for? Is there anything I can get you?'

'You've done that,' he said, the light in his eyes almost out. 'My last wish was to see you.'

I couldn't—nor did I try to—control my tears.

'You know how much I've always loved you,' I said.

'You have been one of the great blessings of my life,' he replied. 'Do you know that?'

I nodded.

'I have to say goodbye now,' he said. 'I want you to promise me you will look after yourself.'

'Yes, yes I will. I promise I will,' I said, standing up to leave. 'Goodbye, David.'

He died the next evening.

A year later Jordan telephoned me one morning and before she could say anything, I knew something dreadful had happened. 'Dad,' she eventually wailed down the phone line, 'Ben is dead. He died last night in a car accident.'

Ben Donohoe, her boyfriend Nick's closest friend, had been hitchhiking home the previous night with a friend after a late work shift. He didn't even have time to

secure his seatbelt before the driver pressed his foot to the pedal and said, ‘Strap yourselves in, guys. You’re in for the ride of your life.’

‘Slow down, slow down!’ they’d screamed as the Volvo station wagon hit 150 kilometres an hour in a 50 zone before jumping the kerb and slamming into a tree. Ben was thrown through the windscreen, and his body was found later in a flowerbed.

Heartbreaking deaths; shocking deaths; angry deaths; reckless deaths; ugly, confronting deaths; chance deaths; accidental deaths; high speed, out-of-control deaths; defiant deaths; premature deaths; long-overdue deaths; surrendering, gracious, accepting, sublime, fearless deaths.

Marcel Proust put it well when he wrote in *Remembrance of Things Past*:

*We may indeed say that the hour of death is uncertain, but when we say this we think of that hour as situated in a vague and remote expanse of time; it does not occur to us that it can have any connection with the day that has already dawned and can mean that death may occur this very afternoon, so far from uncertain, this afternoon whose timetable, hour by hour, has been settled in advance.*

*One insists on one’s daily outings, so that in a month’s time one will have had the necessary ration of fresh air; one has hesitated over which coat to take, which cabman to call; one is in the cab, the whole day lies before one, short because one must be back home early, as a friend is coming to see one; one hopes it will be as fine again tomorrow; and one has no suspicion that death, which has been advancing within one on another plane, has chosen precisely this particular day to make its appearance!*

It seems to me we are surrounded by heartbreak and sorrow, and the more the years accrue, the more space we need inside ourselves for the black tide that is flowing our way—at its potential worst the loss of our children, but also the loss of parents and friends, the loss of memory, the loss of health, the loss of opportunity, the loss of time. Just a series of losses and farewells writing their signatures of grief and sorrow onto our faces.

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In early November 2009, Merran and I separated after nearly twenty-two years of marriage. During the previous few months we had floated the idea of ‘living apart together’—being together on weekends but spending time apart during the week. It made more sense to Merran than to me. Jordan was living in Sydney, Hannah was possibly going to boarding school the following year. (She did and she hated it and we pulled her out after less than one term.) We could be social pioneers, marital pacesetters, acknowledging the travails and challenges of modern life by changing our living arrangements while still being in the relationship.

Counselling—with two different therapists—had failed spectacularly. Reading Esther Perel’s *Mating in Captivity* hadn’t helped much either. ‘Today, we turn to one person to provide what an entire village once did: a sense of grounding, meaning, and continuity. At the same time, we expect our committed relationships to be romantic as well as emotionally and sexually fulfilling. Is it any wonder that so many relationships crumble under the weight of it all?’

Ours did. I think Merran saw in me all the hallmarks of my father, a man whose drive and self-absorption, she believed, had blinded him to the needs of his

own wife, my mother. My mother had never seen her life quite like that. In many ways she'd relished the opportunities my father had given her, but I think it's true to say that she saw the greatest part of her happiness as being in the home, not in the workplace.

Merran didn't want to suffer the same fate. The struggle to have the career she wanted—and deserved—and to still be the mother she needed to be was a source of daily conflict to her and she blamed me for this. Had I been a lot more, or a lot less, of all the things I was and wasn't, her life would have been easier. Her career would have flourished, her burden been lightened. This had been the background noise to our relationship right from the beginning, and in a moment of clarity I had seen this for what it was: a view of me that I didn't think would ever change, perhaps because it was true.

So one evening in early November I told the woman I loved that I was leaving, and that I was going to go and live in my mother's cottage in Federal, twenty-five minutes' drive up into the hills from Byron. My mother had bought this beautiful weatherboard home eight years earlier but rarely used it, mainly because my father never much liked it. I didn't know whether this time apart would last for weeks, months or forever, only that something had to change.

A few days later I told Jordan and we cried together on the phone. She said: 'Dad, I just want you and Mum to be happy and I will love you no matter what.'

Jordan was twenty years of age and was crying not only for herself—and for us, her parents—but also for Hannah, who was going to hear the news later that afternoon. 'I feel so bad for Hannah that she won't have what I had,' she sobbed into the phone. 'She won't have the love I have known.'

I told her that perhaps she was right, but also that Hannah has an older sister—one who could wrap her in her arms when the world felt too much for her, when things no longer made sense.

I dreaded that afternoon with Hannah. I shrank from seeing my younger daughter's face crumble as I told her I was leaving. I dreaded the thought of causing her this anguish, of vacating the space in her life I had always filled and cherished, and that I knew she assumed was one of life's immutable laws. No more lying on her bed in the early evenings and talking to her about her day at school. The boring teacher. The boys that wouldn't grow up. The dreams of Christmas holidays and shopping sprees. No more going to our corner coffee house, the Top Shop, in the morning for raspberry and banana smoothies. No more afternoons helping her with her French lessons and English assignments. No more weekends talking to her before she went out with her friends, her asking me whether the dress looked good, whether the black shoes matched, whether the gold or silver chain worked better. All those daily rituals would end.

That afternoon, I asked Hannah to sit with us in the living room.

'Darling, we have some bad news,' I began. 'I have decided to move out. Mum and I still love each other very much and this has nothing to do with our love for you, but Mum and I have some problems and I feel we need to have some time apart so that we can try to resolve them.'

Hannah was sitting on the couch next to her mother, the tears raining silently down her cheeks as she stared at the floor.

'Darling,' I said, 'I still love your mum. We're still going to see each other. We're going to have dinner next week for her birthday, just on our own. We'll have dates. You won't stop seeing me. You can come and stay with me up in the hills.'

'Yes,' Merran said. 'This won't look like anything you've ever seen or heard before. It won't be like other families. You wait and see ...'

Our daughter refused to look at us.

'Darling, is there anything you want to ask us or anything you'd like to say?' I ventured, after the longest silence of my life.

'No,' she said, standing up. And she walked out of the room. 'Nothing.'

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It's raining today in the subtropics, after another long, dry spell, and there is this divine melody playing once again on the edge of the Australian continent.

I have begun to listen more closely to the riotous sound of birds at dawn, the piping of magpies, the squawking of the scarlet honeyeater and that wonderful cracking duet of the whipbirds—first the long note from the male, then the whip crack and those semi-tones of seduction from the female. These are sounds you only hear in the eastern forests of Australia and it has taken me fifty-three years to tune my city ears to it.

I have also come to understand better why it is that so many people stay together. They don't want to find themselves sitting in a cottage alone in the hills, drinking tequila long into the night. They don't want to face the terror of their own solitude, a solitude that, in my case, I brought upon myself.

For the first week in my mother's cottage in Federal I felt as if I was recovering from a car crash. I sat for hours on the verandah staring at the trees, sipping cups of tea, then slowly getting up to wander around the house.

I looked at old photographs of my parents, my siblings and me taken in London thirty years earlier by Lord Tony Snowdon, husband to the Queen of England's sister, Princess Margaret.

I had always disliked those photos, hating the way Snowdon had tried to make us look like imitation Bloomsburys, with my father sitting in the foreground in an armchair smoking a cigar, my sister plucking at a classical guitar, my brother holding a recorder that he hardly ever played, and me looking like a Carnaby Street dandy in flared pants and an army jacket, also strumming a guitar. Only my mother looked comfortable, sitting at the piano; she was the only member of the family who could actually play the instrument our royal photographer had assigned her.

There are other photos, too—of my father as a boy, taken shortly before he escaped from Germany; of my sister Deborah at the age of twelve, lying on her tummy in the long grass with her best friend Alice, their faces turned to the sun. My brother Danny is here, too, with his oldest friend, Tom, and between them our faithful collie dog Twinks, the dog we were forced to give away when my parents moved to London in 1976.

Unlike the millions of separated men who find themselves in a cheerless suburban bedsit, without furniture, without family photographs, without access to their children, I realise I have arrived in a warm place. A family place. And when my brother comes to stay—which is often now—he cooks thick vegetable soups and

tends the garden and orders a tonne of wood which I stack on the verandah to keep the pot-belly stove crackling all winter.

Often my sister calls to see how I am. My beautiful, flamboyant, creative sister, who was with me for a few days in Paris when everything began to collapse. For much of our lives she'd often felt as though I got there first. I'd smoked before her. I'd lost my virginity before her. I'd learnt to drive before her. I'd married before her. I'd had children while she'd had none. I'd made a good living while she had often struggled. And I must have assumed that I-know-better role, too, because she often felt judged by me.

In Paris, when things were bad with Merran, we corrected this. She held my hand as I cried into another glass of wine, and, God bless her, she actually cried with me.

In these halting, tentative days now, together with the books, paintings and rugs my parents owned, together with my music and these jottings, together with my walks along the ridge of a deep green valley, I am beginning to speak to parts of myself I'd long since forgotten.

Perhaps this is what happens in exile. You come back to a central conversation with yourself, some invisible foundation you never knew existed.

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*And nobody came to see me*

*Only the slow growing of the garden in the summer heat*

*And the silence of that unborn life*

*Making itself known at my desk*

David Whyte

For fifteen months I lived in my mother's cottage and, at some point, I began to enjoy my own life again. There was never a day that I didn't ache for my daughters or dwell on the mistakes I'd made and the pain I'd inflicted on the woman I loved and still love.

But I began to look into the mirror with fresh eyes. I began cooking soups and curries, and chopping wood for winter, and lighting candles at dusk and playing guitar on the verandah and singing love songs in pale imitation of Leonard Cohen and Paul Kelly, and even writing a couple myself.

I spent days on my own, not speaking to a soul, and in the 'winter of my listening', I slowly started coming back to myself and began the process of writing this book. One evening I sat through the worst storm of my life. White gums fell behind the outhouse as gale-force winds and torrential rain wrought havoc up and down the coast. For four days the power was out and I kept the fire crackling and, at night, the candles burning.

I don't know why but I thought about the first time my parents might have danced together; the song I imagined was Roberta Flack's 'If Ever I Could See Your Face'. I could see both their faces in the soft light of their swooning, the sadness that had visited both their lives, and the comfort they seemed to offer one another. I stood on the verandah listening to that song, and as I imagined the two of them dancing, a flock of geese flew past me, swooping through the valley. 'Look at the sky, Dave,' my mother used to tell me when I was growing up.

Occasionally friends would come to stay, people like Petrea King and her partner, Wendie Batho, and I would bring them tea in bed in the morning and

Wendie would make a roast in the evening and we would sit on the verandah looking at the dusky light and talk animatedly, or sometimes just sit together in a blanket of silence.

It had been a lifetime since I'd thought of angels and how, if they were to exist, they might appear to us on this earth. On these visits from two of my dearest friends I came to see that angels were not the supernatural beings of our childhood imaginings; they were here among us, willing to visit us in our dark places.

Jordan was in Sydney developing her career and I saw her as often as I could. Hannah seldom came to visit. I was, after all, in the middle of nowhere. The house groaned at night. The roof crawled with possums and rats. The shower needed fixing and the floorboards had gaping cracks in them through which the air blew cold in winter. It was no place for a fifteen-year-old.

She also had her considerable anger to deal with. She was angry that I thought it only fair and proper she spend half her time with me and half with her mother. She was angry that I was hurt when she didn't come, and that I let her know this, and angry that I made her feel guilty. Most of all, she was angry that I had left, and she told me so one night, although this was two years later, not long before I decided to move back to Sydney.

'Dad, I've got a few things to say and I just want you to listen to me,' she said as she walked into my bedroom and stood facing me as I lay on the bed. She'd been building up to this moment for a long time.

'Sure, darling, I'm listening.'

'Good. I just want to say that I'm sick of you making me feel guilty for not coming and staying with you. I know it upsets you but I just can't handle it anymore.'

I love my home. It's close to school, it's close to the beach and all my friends live nearby and maybe I'm too attached to our family home, but that's the way it is. I just don't want you to keep making me feel guilty about not coming to see you.'

'But ...'

'Just let me finish. You keep saying that I need to see you and you need to see me and that you don't want to be one of those fathers who is never around—and you're not one of those fathers, but it's always about your needs. Your need to have me close by, your need for things to be fair. What about my needs?'

'I know, darl...'

'Let me finish. What about my needs? I needed you not to go, Dad. I needed you not to leave our house. I needed you to be there with me and for me to grow up like Jordan did with both you and Mum in the house. That's what I needed.'

And with that she burst into tears and all I could do, as I too wept, was tell her that I was sorry, that she was right, and that I had been selfish. I told her that she was a courageous girl for telling me, and I was proud of her, and that if she could speak this truth to me then she would be able to speak this kind of truth to any man lucky enough to love and be loved by her.

## 'HAVE YOU GOT A JOB YET, Ya POOR PRICK?'

'Have you got a job yet, ya poor prick?' Peter FitzSimons barked at me.

Peter FitzSimons, author, journalist, broadcaster, former Wallaby—a huge man with a huge heart and a sparkling wit, a living testament to Oscar Wilde's adage that 'moderation is a fatal thing, nothing succeeds like excess'—was calling, as he sometimes did, to see how I was.

'G'day, Pete.'

'So have you got a job yet?'

'Well, it depends on how you look at it,' I replied. 'But no, not really.'

'What are you doing?'

'Well, I've been working on this book ...'

'How long's that going to take you?'

'Probably about as long as five of yours take.'

In 2009, at the time of Fitz's phone call, I was no longer working for the *Women's Weekly*, and German *Vanity Fair*, the magazine I'd been contributing to for a year, had abruptly folded. Italian *Vanity Fair* had also stopped calling and suddenly my income had dried up and I was starting to feel like all those 'poor pricks' who, in these times of new technologies, discarded loyalties and financial collapse, no longer had gainful employment.

Fitz was just putting the finishing touches to his twenty-first book in eighteen years. He'd written biographies on Kim Beazley, Les Darcy, Nancy Wake, Nick Farr-Jones, John Eales, Steve Waugh and Nene King, to name a few. He'd penned

sweeping histories of Kokoda and Tobruk, and was getting ready for the release of his biography of Charles Kingsford Smith, to be launched by the then Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd. He had advances for three more books over the next five years, all of which he was to deliver while this book of mine was experiencing its own strangled birth rites. His publishers loved him. He delivered on time and his books, all written in a folksy, readable style, galloped off the stands.

In between writing his various bestsellers he'd produced regular feature articles for the *Sydney Morning Herald* as well as regular sports columns for the *Herald* and its sister Sunday paper, the *Sun Herald*, and juggled numerous radio, TV and speaking commitments.

Pete and I had known each other for about fifteen years and were friends in the same way board-riders were friends with the ocean. On a good day the ride was a sheer delight, a dance on the edge of a wall of glass where you could surf all the way down the face of the wave into shore. On other days the wave demolished you and it was all you could do to save yourself, let alone think of paddling out for more. Pete was a king tide of nature. One day, in the middle of the *Sydney Morning Herald* newsroom, he actually picked me up in one arm and carried me to his desk like a wounded goat he'd just stumbled across. The stated reason for this bone-crushing display of bonhomie was that he wanted me to read his latest story in the *Herald*. Now he was on the other end of the telephone wanting to know if I had a job.

Our conversation lasted no more than thirty seconds before Fitz signed off with: 'Well, good luck. Got to go ... Love to the kids.'

'What about you, Pete?'

'Yeah, good, busy, racing.'

American author and historian Henry Adams once said: 'A friend in power is a friend lost.' He might have also said: 'A friend out of work is a friend entirely out of play.'

A few months before this phone call, Fitz and his wife Lisa Wilkinson (host of the *Today Show*) had invited me to join them at their table for a lecture that Ray Martin was delivering in honour of Andrew Olle, the late, great radio and television journalist. The night was memorable for a number of reasons, including Ray Martin's fine encapsulation of what a dreadful year 2008 had been for journalists: hundreds of sackings and forced redundancies, newspaper closures and cancelled television programs.

Another reason it was memorable—for me, anyway—was that Peter and Lisa had seated me next to Joe Hockey, still a year away from his grab for the Liberal leadership, and five years away from becoming Federal treasurer in a Tony Abbott-led government.

Hockey had turned to me between the crayfish entrée and the grilled beef main and asked me what I did for a living. I told him I was a writer. He told me he'd never heard of me. That hurt. I found myself telling him about a couple of stories I'd written in the past that he may have read. He had. He nodded. He seemed to approve. I felt validated but I hated every second of the conversation. I hated that I wanted him to know who I was, or who I had once been. I hated that he looked around the table with the gaze of a man who knew he was sitting in the wrong place talking to the wrong person.

There were days when I knew I was part of the conversation. It was a small part, mind you, but a part nonetheless. Then I left the conversation and inserted

myself into a different story, one that involved raising two daughters in Byron Bay, travelling the world for *Women's Weekly*, becoming a caricature of a man having a mid-life crisis and, finally, trying to make sense of my own life by assembling the pieces of my father's. That's how this began—trying to excavate my father's life.

'It's a wise child who knows his own father,' Telemachus told the goddess Athena in Homer's *Odyssey*, and to me it seemed the noble thing, the right thing, for me to try to do, until I realised that I couldn't try to know him without knowing myself. That's because each of us, father and son, are helplessly and permanently contained in the other; and, in my case, every quest for professional recognition, every attempt at rebellion, every effort to throw off my father's yoke in order to fashion my own life, has taken me closer to him without my realising it.

Until now.

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The following year dawned with slightly more promise. In 2010 *Women's Weekly's* new editor, Helen McCabe, called out of the blue to invite me to return to the magazine. It was two years after the GFC and she was offering me a contract for less than half the amount I'd been earning prior to the economic meltdown. The print media was beginning to feel like the asbestos industry in its phasing-out days. Journalists were finding themselves out of work, or choosing redundancy packages that were never going to come again. News Corporation was about to be mired in a sensational hacking scandal and Gina Rinehart was circling the once-proud Fairfax mother ship, with some of the best journalists in the country eventually deserting en masse.

I took the job with the *Weekly* and although there were some choice assignments—an interview with Ingrid Betancourt after her release from captivity in the Amazon rainforest; a cloak-and-dagger meeting in Sydney with Somalia's pin-up anti-Islamist, Ayaan Hirsi Ali; an audience with Meryl Streep in New York—the pickings were slim and the stories no longer challenging.

I joined a documentary team with director Ian Darling to make *Stories of Me*, a film about Paul Kelly, and began writing features again for *Good Weekend*. In the midst of this I also returned to Israel with the notion of trying to forge some small peace between Israelis and Palestinians. I know that sounds both grandiose and pathetic, but I wanted to introduce some of my Israeli friends to a group of Palestinians.

One of the Palestinians had been a former member of Hamas, another a former armed operative in Yasser Arafat's PLO. Both had spent years in Israeli prisons before deciding, on their release, that instead of trying to kill their enemy, they might try to talk to them. The third Palestinian, a mother and teacher—but a radical in the eyes of the Jewish state—was living in the sealed West Bank town of Ramallah. She, too, wanted to know Israelis better.

We met—four Jews and three Arabs—late one afternoon in a petrol station in Jericho, in Area C of the occupied West Bank. It was Ramadan, and the muezzin's prayer had just announced approaching nightfall. We sat on plastic chairs, away from the petrol bowsers, telling each other about our lives, and at the end we exchanged phone numbers and embraced one another with the promise of continued contact.

What had I, this son of Zionists, been looking for all these years? Some sign that this land of haunting beauty and unbearable sadness and sorrow could also, in the case of Jerusalem, live up to its name as the City of Peace; that it could become the New Jerusalem of our highest ideals, rather than the Old Jerusalem of treachery, suspicion and holy murder. I still cling to the Talmudic idea that ‘whoever saves a life saves an entire world’.

After this I enjoyed some light relief on the Greek island of Lesbos, birthplace of Sappho, the most famous of the love poets of ancient Greece, and named by Plato as the ‘tenth muse’ and goddess who had inspired all the arts. Her poetry sang paeans to the loveliness of women, and this was reason enough for thousands of women, many of them lesbians, to make the pilgrimage each year to the northern Aegean.

I arrived from Tel Aviv a few weeks before the International Women’s Festival, but just in time for a workshop in a small community called Afroz, just north of the seaside village of Skala Eressos. I had heard that Afroz was a gorgeous place, surrounded by mountains and set in a valley of olive trees. It had been established by followers of Osho, and you could spend days meditating, learning about nutrition and studying ayurvedic massage, self-hypnosis and ‘prana’ healing. You could analyse the polarities of your ‘inner man’ and ‘inner woman’, learn how to ‘die before you die’, or you could bypass all this and just enter the ‘tantra lifestyle’ with Svarap and Premartha. That’s what I decided to do.

When I walked into the tantric sex room there were about forty people there, men and women from all over the world, fully clothed and, to my delight, not a single person I knew, nor was ever likely to see again.

Svarap and Premartha were already explaining the wisdom of tantra when I arrived. ‘Tantra taps into our sexual energy,’ said Premartha, a lithe and fetching beauty. ‘It rekindles passion. It lights the long-lost fire. You need to keep it slow. Pay attention to your breath. Learn to trust. Feel into your chakras, your energy channels.’

After these initial briefings Svarap and Premartha asked us to move around the room without speaking, then to stop suddenly and sit cross-legged in front of the person we found ourselves facing.

‘Now look into each other’s eyes,’ Svarap instructed, ‘and hold your gaze and breathe slowly and deeply. Feel yourself gazing deep into the other’s soul. Trust the process.’

The woman opposite me was pale-skinned, with bright blue eyes, her brown hair falling around her shoulders. She was petite and lovely, and she was staring at me with an ironic smile. I stared back, concentrating on my breathing, and the longer I breathed and gazed, the more beautiful my pale, blue-eyed companion became. We sat like this for five minutes.

‘Now stand opposite each other and hold each other’s gaze,’ said Premartha. ‘Harmonise your breathing with your gaze. One of you will become a mountain; the other will bend like a branch in the wind into this mountain. The branch will surrender. The mountain will stand firm.’

My new friend began falling into my arms, sighing heavily as my base chakra starting murmuring from behind its threadbare fortress (I was wearing drawstring cotton pants). We stood like this for another five minutes, heart to heart, breast to

breast, groin to groin, taking in the rhythms of each other's inhalations and exhalations.

Then it was my turn to bend into the arms of this stranger. More breathing. More breast to breast and groin to groin. More rumblings from the lower chakra.

'Now we'd like you to take it in turns sitting with each other like this,' said Svarap, as Premartha straddled Svarap and wrapped her tawny legs around her loin-clothed partner. 'And just keep breathing.'

We still hadn't spoken to each other. I didn't know her name, nor where she was from, but she was now sitting in my lap with her legs wrapped around me, and her yoni—yes, *her yoni*—and my lingam were in rather generous and receptive proximity to one another. She began to whimper. I began to think this was possibly the greatest afternoon of my adult life and that Sappho, goddess of all poets, was blessing me from the celestial light.

We ended up at the nudist beach that afternoon. The Aegean looked dead and otherworldly blue. Naked bodies yawned and stretched under a merciless sun. My new friend and I lolled in the shallows talking. I had my Speedos on. She was topless. She said she was an Austrian television journalist, and that she loved to read Turkish and African novels. She travelled a lot, and this was her first tantric sex workshop. Her voice was deep and husky, her English flawless. She laughed, a sound not unlike a Viennese waltz.

We circled each other and then she began swimming away in the direction of Albania. I stayed in the shallows, anchored to the shore by my manhood.

She swam for a long time before slowly turning and beginning her languorous return to Greece. I drifted towards her, longing for the cold waters to shrink my

lingham. She drifted into my arms and wrapped her slender pale legs around mine. We trod water and kissed, and then spent much of the next two days together. Just before we said goodbye she told me her name was Sabine.

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On 17 November 2012 I left Byron Bay, having stayed twelve years longer than I'd ever intended. The last story I wrote from the region turned out to be a good prompt for my departure. It was a piece for *Good Weekend* on Serge Benhayon, a former tennis coach from Alstonville who'd become an 'energy healer' after realising he was the reincarnation of Leonardo da Vinci, St Peter, Pythagoras and Imhotep, the twenty-seventh-century BC Egyptian high priest. (He also came to see that his daughter, Simone, a former swimming teacher, was the reincarnation of Winston Churchill.)

Byron Bay was full of people who talked about 'energy' and, if truth be known, I'd become one of them, but Serge Benhayon's claims to know what food was energetically sound, what music, what books, what works of art were permissible to his followers on the basis of their 'energetic integrity' was a bridge too far—even though, as an old Elvis fan myself, I was intrigued by his assertion that Elvis had returned to earth as 'an esoteric being'.

Where was he now? I asked, barely disguising my incredulity.

'Somewhere,' Benhayon replied.

In the world today?

'Yeah.'

Where do you think?

'I don't disclose things like that.'

Is he in America?

'No.'

Africa?

'No.'

Is he near Alstonville?

'No.'

Is he in Australia?

'He's in Asia somewhere.'

Asia's a big place. Can we narrow it down?

'I don't know that ... All I'm doing is presenting it esoterically.'

And all I was doing now was heading away from Serge Benhayon as fast as I could. A few weeks later I drove down the coast with my old school friend, Rob Hirst, who had rented us his house for those first five years of our 'sea change' and who, over the years, had proved himself to be one of our most faithful friends.

He'd flown up the night before my departure so that he could accompany me on what he knew would be one of the longest drives of my life. A few nights earlier I'd said goodbye to some of the people who had helped make Byron Bay the place it had been, the place that at one stage I'd thought I'd never leave. A dinner party had been held in my honour and everyone had made a speech, including Merran, who'd warmly wished me well.

I was moving back to Sydney to be closer to family and friends, and to enter a new conversation that was to prove a very, very long way from Leonardo da Vinci's esoteric healing, tantric sex workshops or Path of Love retreats. It was, in fact, a

curious path back to my father's door via a global executive search firm called Egon Zehnder, named after its Swiss German founder.

Egon Zehnder, the firm not the man, had asked me to write a history of the organisation to commemorate its fifty-year anniversary, and although I knew absolutely nothing about executive search and next to nothing about business, I had known of Egon Zehnder since the late 1970s, when my father had taken over as managing director of British Condé Nast. 'This man, Egon Zehnder,' he told me on several occasions, 'is one of the warmest, most charming and intelligent men I've ever met.'

Egon Zehnder was in the business of finding executives for leading corporations around the world. He'd started out with one office in Zurich in 1964 and over the succeeding half-century had spread to sixty-eight offices in forty-one countries. His organisation's client list was a who's who of market leaders and, during his heyday at Condé Nast, my father had been one of them, employing the services of Egon Zehnder to find senior executives for Condé Nast's expanding global operations. This was a new challenge, a point of entry into a world I'd always resisted but that had irrevocably shaped me.

Like my father, Egon Zehnder had been born between the Great War and the rise of Adolf Hitler and, like my father, revered Winston Churchill and great military figures like Montgomery of Alamein, General George Marshall and the legendary General George Patton. Also like my father, Egon Zehnder was a gentleman possessed of Old European values who had started out in business during a time when permanent careers and institutional loyalty had counted for something; when perfectly viable businesses hadn't been gutted or abandoned, their employees set

adrift, purely to prove to the market that they were capable of change; when people visited each other in their offices rather than sent emails; when handwritten notes of thanks weren't considered quaint; when men stood up for women as they walked into a room; when mutual commitment bound people together, not just in the family but in the workplace; when organisations were informed by shared principles and beliefs.

Both men came from a rarefied time and place in history. Both were trans-Atlantic figures, members of—or with visiting rights to—the best clubs in Europe and the United States; men whose wardrobes were full of the finest Italian or English suits and ties; men who loved to flirt shamelessly—and did so elegantly—with beautiful women; men who drank kirsch and cognac and smoked cigars after lunch; men who knew all the movers and shakers, concierges and maître d's in all the great capitals of the world; men whose networking skills were so sublime that even if they'd ended up somewhere like Phnom Penh they would have been able to call on someone to meet them for dinner, most probably the French or US or Australian ambassador.

All my adult life I had walked past a framed list of my father's 'philosophies and convictions' on the living-room wall without ever paying it any heed. Just before I left for Europe to interview Egon Zehnder I took a good look at it. Full of simplistic homilies and aphorisms, it spoke nonetheless to a value system—and a fading world—that my father had always stood for and that was now revealing itself to me through the life of an eighty-three-year-old Swiss German.

*Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls your ego goes with it.*

*Get mad, then get over it.*

*Don't let adverse facts stand in the way of a good decision.*

*Share credit.*

*Check small things.*

*Have a vision. Be demanding.*

*Don't take counsel of your fears or naysayers.*

*Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.*

*Remain calm. Be kind.*

The night before I flew to Europe I had dinner with my parents and my sister Deborah. It was the first time in thirteen years that, together with my brother Danny, we'd all found ourselves living in the same city.

Ram Dass, the contemporary American spiritual teacher, once observed: 'If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family,' and this particular dinner was a reminder of this shining truth.

'It's wheat-free,' my sister says, bringing the vegetarian lasagne, brown and sizzling in its dish, into the living room as my parents and I sit glued to the news and Leigh Sales' latest interrogation on *The 7.30 Report*.

'What's the white stuff?' my mother replies, scraping it away from the eggplant.

'It's ricotta, Mum.'

'I see.'

'What did you say?' my father says.

'I SEE,' my mother says loudly.

'I see what?' my father says.

'I see it's ricotta,' my mother says.

'Don't you like ricotta?' my sister says.

'What did you say?' my father says.

'I SAID, "DON'T YOU LIKE RICOTTA?"' my sister says.

'What's ricotta?' my father says.

'It's the white stuff,' I say.

'Who doesn't like it?' my father says.

'Mum,' my sister says.

'I didn't say I didn't like it,' my mother says.

'Well, why aren't you eating it then?' my sister says.

'Because it's cold,' my mother says.

'How can it be cold?' my sister says. 'It's piping hot. Is yours piping hot, Dad?'

'Sorry?' my father says.

'IS YOURS PIPING HOT, DAD?'

'Yes, it's hot,' my father says.

'Mine's cold,' my mother says.

'Look, it can't be cold, Mum. Is yours cold, Dave?'

'No, mine's not cold, Deb.'

'You see, Mum? Ours isn't cold, so how can yours be cold?'

'I don't know, but it is,' my mother says.

'Do you want me to put it back in the oven, then?' my sister says.

'No, it's fine,' my mother says.

'How can it be fine if it's cold?' my sister says.

'What are you saying, Barb?' my father says.

'I'M SAYING IT'S OKAY,' my mother says.

'What's okay?' my father says.

'THE DINNER,' my mother says.

'I thought you said it was cold,' my father says.

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I have been blessed with a loving, caring family. My sister cares enough to spend four hours preparing a wheat-free vegetarian dinner for her family, knowing that her brother—me—has gone on a special cleansing diet and that our mother, if she's not on a special cleansing diet, should be.

She cares enough that after a busy day as a nutritionist and art therapist she is prepared to dash from her house in East Sydney to our parents' apartment in Elizabeth Bay so that our mother won't have to cook, and so that we can have a rare family meal together.

She cares that our mother doesn't like the ricotta and that her meal has gone miraculously cold. She cares, too, that her efforts have gone unremarked—by our mother, at least—and there's a pile of ricotta sitting on her plate.

Our mother doesn't care for ricotta, but cares that her daughter is upset with her. Our father cares as well. He cares that our mother doesn't like the ricotta and that her meal is not hot enough. He cares that he can't hear anything being said unless it's being shouted at him and that because of this he is unable to join in the conversation, not that this is a conversation he'd ever choose to join.

My father can no longer see through his right eye, but you can sense through his left that he's still searching for the glittering palaces he once moved through with confidence and style. Never a particularly fit or good-looking man, he was always warm and stylish, his thick curly grey hair—which he combed back with Fixaline—a distinguished companion to his black spectacles.

When he wakes now in the middle of the night, filled with indecipherable sadness, when by day he shuffles slowly about the house with his walking frame, unable to find things, calling out for help, demanding that people come, it's obvious he's having a mighty time trying to reconcile how far he has come from the lofty heights of Madison Avenue and Times Square.

People no longer seek out his advice because, as Victor Hugo once wrote, 'Those with an eye to the future flutter round the illustrious present', and my father is no longer an illustrious present.

Most days he doesn't surface till midday, although sometimes as late as 5 pm, and even then only by some stupendous act of determination. Who knows when he will leave us (he's booked the Australia Club for his ninetieth birthday next year!), but I can feel his immense sadness, even now, at the prospect of having to say goodbye to those he loves.

When I ask him how he is feeling, he says that growing old is difficult but he is in no pain. He then looks at me with the most loving expression and says, 'Often when I'm depressed I take out the letter you wrote me a few years ago. It makes me feel better.'

*Do you remember, Dad, the first time we went to Germany? The Wall was still up and we had to go through Checkpoint Charlie. We ate a hotdog somewhere in the West and had a photograph taken of us doing so. We both ate simultaneously from either end and I think you got there first, mustard and ketchup all over your chin. We drove from Berlin down to Sondershausen, via Potsdam and Leipzig, to the town where you grew up, and from where you fled in April 1939.*

*You introduced me to Gerhard, your childhood friend. You showed me the house you grew up in on Von Hindenburg Avenue. You shared with me the stories of your youth—sad, broken stories that I took deep into my soul and that I carry to this day. Thank you for sharing your history, my history, with me. Thank you for explaining to me where I came from.*

That was in 1985, four years before the Wall had come down, hammered, beaten, almost psychically commanded into extinction by a people desperate to realise their freedom. We had driven through Checkpoint Charlie, still a forbidding crossing point as opposed to the tourist mecca it is today, and into the cellar-dark coldness of the East German communist state.

From East Berlin we drove down through the north German plains into Leipzig, then west along the banks of the Wipper River into Sondershausen, in north Thuringia, where my father had spent his desperately lonely childhood.

We were inside the giant prison of the German Democratic Republic, a walled-in nation of seventeen million, one Stasi agent, or informer, for every sixty-three people, to spend a few days with Gerhard Braun, my father's oldest friend. It

was Gerhard who, as a little boy, had been brave enough to play with my father when it was no longer safe to do so.

Three years after my father had fled Germany in 1939, Gerhard Braun had been drafted into the German armed forces to fight the Allies in Normandy. He was only seventeen years old. Two years later, in August 1944, he'd been injured and taken prisoner by the Canadians at the famous Battle of the Hedgerows at St Lô in north-western France. He'd been imprisoned first in London, then Glasgow, then sent by ship to a military hospital in New York before returning to Sondershausen a year after the war ended.

By this time a third of Sondershausen had been destroyed and the town was well inside the Russian Zone of occupation. Gerhard was arrested for failing to produce the correct documents and imprisoned in a small cell. He then escaped and ran forty kilometres through the night to his grandparents' house in the British Zone, where he stayed for the next nine months.

After this he'd moved to the university town of Jena in central Germany, where he studied optometry and met Helga, the fellow student who would three years later become his wife. It was not until 1959 that he returned to Sondershausen, now inside the new socialist-run German Democratic Republic. That was the same year my father had started *Australian Vogue*.

In 1969 these two men had found each other again through my grandfather's former secretary. Gerhard had sent a letter to my father in Sydney and two years later, after an absence of thirty-two years, they'd been reunited in this old Prussian garrison town.

This was where my father, Bernd Leser, had grown up and where my grandfather, Kurt Leser, was born, and my great-grandfather, Arthur Leser, a butcher to the counts and princes of Thuringia; and my great-great-grandfather, Moses Leser; and so, too, my great-great-great-grandfather, David Leser. This is where I came to bear witness to my father's early life, to get a glimpse of the boy he'd once been, to listen to him speak German, to stand in his shadow and the shadow of all the Leser men who had come before us.

## THE NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES

In December 2012, I took a twin propeller plane from Vienna to Leipzig in a snow storm, hoping that the winds blowing in from Siberia wouldn't stop me from arriving in the land of my forefathers. I actually had no idea why I was returning, only that after meeting Egon Zehnder in Zurich and visiting Sabine in Vienna, I felt drawn once again to the Germany of my father's childhood.

In Zurich, Egon Zehnder and I had talked about his life and career and growing up on the eve of war as well as his father's efforts to save desperate Hungarian Jews by concealing forged passports in his suitcase. As the bells from Zurich's Fluntern church tolled in the background, I'd thought momentarily about my grandfather, here in 1916, a sergeant in the German Imperial Regime injured in the trenches with shrapnel and mustard gas, being repatriated by his French captors back to Germany via Switzerland.

In Vienna, Sabine and I had combined our journalistic skills to try to find any living relatives of the SA officer who had saved my grandfather and father's lives. I had learnt his name—Erhard Greifzu—from my father but Sabine and I had been unable to find any of Greifzu's descendants. We'd talked long into the night about the fact that for hundreds of years, stretching back into the Middle Ages, there'd been a symbiosis between German and Jewish cultures, one that had represented the best of the German enlightenment with writers like Heinrich Heine, composers such as Gustav Mahler, and latter-day Hollywood film directors such as Otto Preminger and Billy Wilder. Until Hitler's ascent to power in 1933, these two cultures had been interdependent, almost inseparable, but by attempting to exterminate the

Jewish people the Nazis had ended up severing the Jewish and German souls from one another. In the process, German culture had amputated a pivotal part of itself from which it had never recovered. It was just a theory, but it was one that resonated.

In 1995, when my father and I had visited Berlin for a second time, a local sculptor had invited us for dinner in his large warehouse on the edge of the old border crossing that had miraculously opened up six years earlier. Throughout the dinner the sculptor had peppered my father with questions about his early years in Germany and the views he now held of the German people. At the end of the night, this bearish man had taken my father in his arms and said to him tearfully, ‘Bernd, thank you. Thank you for coming back.’

Perhaps this was why Germany now had the only growing Jewish population in all of Europe—some 200,000 and counting—because in some part of the German and Jewish souls, we were looking for one another again. And perhaps that was why I was back in Germany too—a son still carrying the body and soul of his father.

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It was the first night of winter 2012 and the streets were frozen white when I arrived in Sondershausen. Gerhard Braun was waiting for me in the carpark outside my hotel the following morning, wearing a beige parka, his grey hair combed back over his beaming, youthful face.

We greeted each other warmly, before lapsing into silence. Neither of us spoke the other’s language, but we had an interpreter with us, Antje Weida, Gerhard’s delightful great-niece who had travelled from Gottingen, 100 kilometres

away, in order to translate for us while Gerhard took me on the Grand Tour of my father's childhood home.

Here was where my grandfather's textile factory had stood, before being destroyed during the Allied bombings of 1945; over there was the synagogue on Bebra Strasse—today a shopping mall—with its simple but beautiful onyx plaque honouring the Jews of Sondershausen: *Nicht Vergessen*, not forgotten. On up into the hills with their sweeping views over a snow-laden town, and the monument at the top to the fallen from both world wars. The wind biting, even my pockets frozen.

Back into town and there was my father and grandfather's thatch-roofed house, painted yellow now, with rosehips growing at the front fence and the hedgerows offering protection from the wind and ice.

Just two blocks away was the house of Erhard Greifzu, the SA chief, and the road leading down to the park where he'd come to meet my grandfather just days before Kristallnacht. Virtually a clearing today, seventy-four years ago it was full of oaks and bushes in front of a World War I memorial. Gone, too, was the park bench behind the bushes where couples once canoodled, or speculated on the fate of millions, or perhaps issued warnings in secret.

'This was a good place to meet,' Gerhard told me, 'because you could see if anyone was coming, and if they were, one person could go one way and the second the other way, and you could just say, if asked, "We are visiting the monument." Everyone knew the night had a thousand eyes.'

And then over to the three-hundred-year-old Jewish cemetery accompanied now by the curator of the local museum, Bettina Bernienghausen, who has spent

years studying Sonderhausen's Jewish community, even though not a single Jew lives in the town today.

'Here is your great-great-grandmother's grave,' she said, and there was the headstone of Seraphine Leser (nee Goldschmidt), the grand matriarch of the Leser clan who between 1858 and 1879 had managed to produce fifteen children before—so the story went—throwing herself out of the window on realising she was pregnant with her sixteenth. But on closer inspection of her grave, this seemed an improbable story, given that Seraphine died in 1889 at the age of fifty-two, and her last child, Harry Leser, was born ten years earlier. It was unlikely that Seraphine Leser could have fallen pregnant in her early fifties.

The snow was tumbling across the cemetery now and the chill was lodging itself deep in my bones. Gerhard followed me with his umbrella through this Narnia land of snow and gravestones, taking photos of me alongside my ancestors. He came here often, he told me, sometimes to inspect the plots, at other times just to sit in the adjoining garden and read.

'Your great-grandfather, Arthur Leser, is buried here,' he said, 'but there is no headstone. And this is Hermann Braun's grave and an empty one next to it for your great-great-aunt Sophie.'

How did he know this? Why had he made it his business to know? What meaning can he have derived from being the keeper of my family's history?

Later, over lunch with his son Harald and daughter-in-law Martina, I began to fathom the depths of Gerhard Braun, this giant figure burnished into the Leser mythology. The table was laden with homemade sausages and salamis, strudels and cakes, an assortment of chocolates, coloured balls and Christmas ivy, and four gold

candles. In between bites of sausage and strudel, Gerhard recalled the period leading up to Kristallnacht, three years after Hitler's ascent to power.

'It only started becoming difficult in 1936/37. People began talking about my friendship with your father and my parents had confrontations with people who said things like, "Why are they still playing together? Why doesn't Gerhard have other friends?"'

'But my father was 100 per cent anti-Nazi and everyone knew that. He later took an oath refusing to join the Volkssturm [the national militia comprising sixteen-to sixty-year-olds that Hitler set up in 1944] and was lucky they didn't shoot him.'

Gerhard and my father had become friends at the Goethe Primary School in 1931. The two boys loved to play with my father's little train set after school. At other times they would run in the garden and pick apples from the trees.

By the time they entered secondary school, my father was the only Jew in a class of twenty-seven. 'Nobody is alive from that class anymore,' Gerhard said. 'Just me and Bernd.'

In 1938 my father was sent to his Jewish boarding school in Coburg, and the next time Gerhard saw his friend was just after Kristallnacht, when my father returned to Sondershausen. 'Ernie was with him in the street and my mother saw them and said, "Look, Gerhard, Bernd is here," and I said to Bernd, "How are you?"' And Ernie said, "Gerhard, we have no time, we have to leave."

'We only spoke for ten minutes in front of my parents' shop because Ernie kept saying, "We can't stay, we have to go." Your father was wearing a Star of David on his chest, just like the other Jews in town had started to do.'

'Bernd was lucky he left. There was another very nice family, the Simons, who had a ten-year-old boy. One night in 1942 they were picked up and then they were gone.'

The liverwurst, knackwurst and thuringer rotwurst are piling up on my plate and there are still five different cakes that I know the family wants me to sample. Martina is crying and all I can think about is how the cruel, miraculous fortunes of fate saw one boy fleeing to the other side of the world, to end up publishing glossy magazines, while the other boy remained at home to live under first, the Nazis, then the Communists.

Where were they, I asked, when the Wall finally came down?

'It was absolutely great. Absolutely great,' Harald beamed. 'We were living in a little flat in Sondershausen and it was night-time and I was asleep on the sofa and Martina's grandmother was visiting from Hamburg.'

'Martina used to be a hairdresser and they had dryers on their heads and they couldn't hear what was going on, even though they could see the television. Martina woke me and I looked at the screen and said, "This is not normal. It can't be true. We are free to travel. It can't be true." And when we realised it *was* true, that we were free, my father and I drove to West Germany and bought a lawnmower.'

Twenty years after the Wall came down my father sent Gerhard the 732-page special edition of German *Vogue* produced to mark the thirty-year anniversary of its launch in 1979. It included a story I had written about my father's early days in Germany, his departure five months before the outbreak of World War II, and his return forty years later to establish *Vogue*'s presence in his former homeland.

The story surprised many who had not known of my father's origins, and he seemed relieved to finally have that part of his history laid bare. He wanted Gerhard to read the story, so he arranged for Condé Nast's Munich office to send what must have been the largest magazine ever delivered by the German postal system to Sondershausen.

Gerhard wrote my father shortly afterwards.

*My dear old friend ,*

*Many times I have had your Vogue in my hands—and read through it again and again, thinking and reflecting, letting a long life pass by. For sure, my dear friend, I cannot simply read those lines because while I'm reading I see everything clearly before my face, pictures of that time, the surroundings. I live again through a time passed by long ago.*

*David has summarised your long life in only a few pages and ... the reader can feel from every line how exceptional your life has been with all its ups and downs, with happiness and agony—and with your indomitable will to live and work.*

*When you were young, your home country was not friendly towards you (or the people at this time). Only a few continued your friendship, something you needed so much then. I know this too well.*

*Against all odds and through difficulty, we have established a friendship that has survived and proven of value for more than a lifetime. I would like to thank you for including me in your lines. I am deeply moved!*

*My dear Bernd ... I hope that we will have the possibility in both our lives to see each other one more time.*

*Your old friend Gerhard*

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There are many people who have absolutely no idea where they come from, nor do they much care. Perhaps they are less sentimental or curious about these things than I am, or perhaps they just feel freer to imagine their lives shaped by invisible forces, or shaped by no one in particular, least of all long-forgotten ancestors.

I don't know when it was I began to care. Perhaps I always did, although never enough, until now, to try to wrap my arms around this history of mine.

Perhaps my surge of curiosity was awakened on that trip in 1985, when my father and I visited Gerhard Braun in Sondershausen for the first time and he took us to the park where my grandfather and the SA officer had held their fateful meeting forty-seven years earlier.

What I remember most about that first visit was how Gerhard had guided us to a meadow with a long, sloping view to the lake and a park bench, almost hidden in the long grass; and how my father had taken my hand in his to describe the historic rendezvous between his own father and the SA chief; how his voice had then caught with the emotion of its dramatic implications—a Nazi official daring to risk his own life for a Jew.

I have thought often of the peace and tranquillity of that park, and my father remarking on how curious it was that such a meeting, such a moment of menace and redemption, had occurred in a place such as this—all those concerts in the nearby amphitheatre, and then boating on the lake nearby.

Perhaps this is when I was first struck by the thought that I was only alive and free because of a miraculous exchange that had taken place in 1938. And, in turn,

that this exchange had only become possible because of an act of valour twenty-two years before that, during World War I.

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There is hardly a man I know who can speak easily or lovingly about his father. Some have been handicapped from the start because they lost theirs early, through death or abandonment. Others tried for years, but encountered only confrontation and heartbreak. The majority were caught somewhere in between these two cold fronts, as if one wrong move by either side might suddenly bring the whole house down.

My father and I have had our stand-offs, our fierce clashes, but there has never been a second's doubt that he loved me, that there wasn't anything in the world he wouldn't do for me. Except, perhaps, give me the time that any child yearns for from their parents.

For years while I was growing up, I could never really understand his absences. I could never understand how dinners and cocktail parties and first nights could be more important than spending time with me, his son. I couldn't articulate this, of course, but I can see now how it fuelled my ambition, my underlying anger and rebellion, and my search for meaning in so many places—synagogues, temples, yoga retreats, tantric workshops, old Jerusalems, new Jerusalems, Paths of Love, paths away from my family's door.

I can see also how it fuelled a huge desire to do him proud. All my life—even in his presence—I have missed him and wanted him and carried an image of him deep inside me as a way of trying to bring him closer to me. I have, as a little boy—but also as a grown man—listened to his story, taken on his history, assumed his

pain and ambitions, struggled with his multitude of ghosts, all in the name of a love and identification I could never quite name.

'What was silent in the father speaks in the son,' Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 'and often I found in the son the unveiled secret of the father.'

Perhaps I knew from the time I was small the traumas my father had borne as a boy himself—small compared to what many endured, but considerable enough and beyond anything I was ever to experience. I'm sure he told me about how his mother had left the family home and his stepmother had died and how his second stepmother had helped him escape from the country that no longer wanted him.

In my mind's eye I could always see him travelling on a train by himself from Sondershausen to Berlin to visit his mother, dressed in lederhosen, with his name, 'Bernd Leser' on a small sign hanging around his neck, as he stared forlornly out the window at all the empty fields and grey tenement blocks festooned with swastikas. A little boy, mostly friendless, motherless and stateless, travelling on a big train through a terrifying fatherland.

Paul Auster wrote in *The Invention of Solitude*: 'You do not stop hungering for your father's love even after you are grown up.' One moves in the shadows of one's parents and, as a son, particularly in the shadows of one's father. If we all have, as Richard Freedman says, 'a core story to tell, a story that lies at the heart of all the stories', then maybe, along with the story of my grandfather and his Nazi friend, the story of my father has always been my core story. Because like Paul Auster, I have carried around my father's solitude all my life, and like Auster's example of

Pinocchio's creator, Geppetto, in the belly of the whale, I have always had the desire to save him from this solitude.

I can see the weight my father has carried more clearly now than at any time in my life, and even though it was always his to carry, it has felt heavy on my shoulders too.

My father was—and is—a good man, in some ways a great man with great flaws, great attributes and great contradictions. He was humble but at times impossibly lofty. He was deeply insecure but tightly wound and, therefore, seemingly invulnerable. He was an honest man, a loving man, and he had lived such a lonely childhood, without a mother, without a sibling, without friends for the most part, and he'd been mocked and bullied and banished at school, and forced to flee his country, and then he'd launched himself on a near miraculous path of reinvention, such that no one would ever have guessed he was once a little German Jewish boy exiled from his homeland.

But the truth is also that all my life I have loved this man and missed him in equal measure. Even when I was with him I missed him. Missed the times we'd not shared when I was young. Missed the words that might have filled the silences that often seemed to creep over our conversations. Missed the times together that could have occurred when I was in Australia and he was living in England and America, rising further and further to the top of an impossibly glamorous profession, and further and further away from me.

I know that when he is gone, I will miss him even more—for the times we will never share again, and for the times we could have shared but didn't when he was still alive.

My father gave me a gift that I don't often see other men being handed. The gift of feeling 'beloved on this earth', as Raymond Carver once put it, of being able 'to call myself beloved', which—as it so happens—is the meaning of the Hebrew name, David. *Beloved*.

In growing up with this love, my father—and my mother, too—enabled me to love myself and to be able to pass this love on to my own children. To this day my father still sends my various articles to friends around the world with the naïve pleasure and pride of someone who thinks his friends might be interested. He still writes me letters telling me how proud he is of me—as a son, a father, a friend, a writer. Remarkably, he still calls me 'darling' and tells me he loves me whenever I speak to him on the phone, or whenever I come to visit.

That's something I like to think might be the crux of everything, and that no amount of therapy, or love from a woman, or friendship circle, or professional success can ever replace. That's because nothing can ever fill the great well of longing that comes from the absence of a father's love for his child.

As my father moves further into the evening shadows of his own life, I can see that he is still trying to hand me the torch so that my way might be clearer and lighter than his ever was.

Actually, he passed me this torch a long time ago. I just needed to have eyes to see it.

## **Part 2**

**Whose Story is it? To begin to know**

**The exegesis**

## **Introduction**

This dissertation interrogates the complexities of the relationship between the writer and his subjects, principally his father, but also his mother, former wife and two daughters. It does so in the context of memoir or life-writing as a sub-genre of creative non-fiction. It is impossible to fulfil this brief without also looking at the deep moral and ethical questions that life writing presents, a conundrum expounded upon by numerous scholars and writers such as Barbour (2004), Couser (2011/2012), Eakin (2004), Freadman (2004), Mansfield (2013) Malcolm (1990), Mills (2004), Montello (2006), Oakley (2010) and others.

Couser has specifically written about the trend of American life writing as “filial narrative”. He claims this as “memoirs of parents by their sons and daughters” (Couser 2012, p.154). He calls such memoirs of fathers “patriography”, and cites numerous examples of sons assuming the task of writing about their celebrity fathers, namely Davis Reagan (Ronald Reagan), and the sons respectively of writer, John Cheever, actor, Orson Wells, and German-born, American psychologist, Erik Erikson (Couser 2011, p.891). Similarly, I am writing patriography, and what is perhaps unique about this in the Australian context is the fact of my own father’s considerable success as an international publishing figure, and my own sometimes highly public role as a profiler of well-known figures. This memoir, however, is not purely patriarchal because it also involves an investigation of my relationship with my mother, former wife and two daughters, while, at the same time, opening a “window to the soul” (Gerder in Yagoda 2009, p.63).

Mine.

Given the enormity of ethical issues that life writing involves, this dissertation will also look at questions around memoir as both autobiography and biography. As Oakley writes: “The text of a written biography is the product of two biographies – that of the writer and the person written about” (Oakley 2010,

p.431). This hybrid approach is both an attempt to deal with some of the ethical considerations involved while still writing with personal integrity.

One of the methods I employ is autoethnography, whereby the writer utilises a combination of self-examination and examination of others to elucidate his narrative. As explained by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), autoethnography is an “approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.1). The autobiographical component will naturally include “epiphanies (or) remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of (the writer’s) life” while also investigating the “ethnography”, namely “the common values and beliefs, and shared experiences” pertaining to culture (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.3). In this instance, the culture is Judaism or Jewishness and how both my parents’ Jewish heritage influenced my own value system as well as involvement in – and writing about – Middle Eastern politics.

By also employing a “patriographical” approach I hope to fulfil what Couser suggests is one of the “fundamental capabilities” of life writing of this sort. Rather than “seeking to immortalise oneself by writing a memoir ... not necessarily a noble endeavour ... (one can) immortalise someone other than the author (whereby) a different sort of impulse is involved” (Couser 2012, p.179). My goal in this project, therefore, becomes one of primarily advancing my understanding of my father and other subjects, because by writing “I come to know (all of them and myself) better” (Couser 2011, p.893).

In Chapter One, I contextualise how the creative component of this doctorate came about. In Chapter Two, I consider the history of patriography as one form of life writing, drawing on sources such as Couser, Yagoda and Eakin, but also the defining work by Stephen Mansfield, *Patriography: How Sons Write Fathers in Contemporary Life Writing* (Mansfield, 2013). It will look at the way memoir has evolved from the time of St Augustine’s *Confessions* around 50 BCE, through to the proliferation of life-writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, entailing everything from an investigation of a man’s spiritual path

(Augustine) to the “striking egocentrism” (Yagoda 2009, p.41) of certain latter day memoirs, and the more egregious fraudulent memoirs of recent years, most notoriously, but not definitively, James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), as well as Norma Khouri’s *Forbidden Love* (2003). I will also include here a discussion of the ethics of life writing, posing my core question: *Whose story is it and, if it's mine to tell, do I have a right to answer it if there is a risk of hurt or injury to others by doing so?*

This chapter also makes specific reference to the scholarship surrounding the ethics and morality of life writing framed by my own research methodology of narrative inquiry, developed during the course of thirty-seven years working as a journalist. It looks at how my approach to life-writing evolved during the course of this project, from its inception as an attempt to get my father to write his own autobiography, to it becoming more a “patriography” – a son writing about his father’s life; and then finally into a hybrid where I combine elements of biography, autobiography and autoethnography to investigate my subject. This dissertation naturally explores many of the ethical and moral minefields inherent to life writing, and how the writer makes his choices. My belief, and personal conviction since completing my own memoir, is that it is ethically fraught to rely on Couster’s assertion that “patriography ... may appeal to their authors in part as a way to memorialize the parents who gave them life, completing a circle, returning a gift” (Couster 2012, pp.179-180), particularly if it ends up causing pain and injury.

In Chapter Three, I look at two other patriarchal case studies and compare my work, through an ethical lens, on a spectrum that I believe will help locate it. These works include Martin Amis’s *Experience* (2001) and Philip Roth’s *Patrimony* (1991), both attempts by the respective writers to come to terms with their fathers.

The penultimate chapter (Four) is a reflective piece on the process of writing and undertaking the research for the memoir. This comes down to very personal values in the end and may involve a challenge to the prevailing ethos of what

Jungian psychologist, Peter O'Connor calls "a world obsessed with action" (O'Connor 1981, p.38), a propensity by people to act, to do something rather than nothing, even when in doubt. This then necessitates reference to wider texts, including the above-mentioned Couser, Eakin, Mansfield, Mills and Freadman, along with a number of others. This reflective chapter, therefore, canvasses the multitude of views pertaining to memoir, from Rousseau's landmark *Confessions* which Yagoda says: "...altered the understanding of autobiography" because of its "...belief in total frankness" (Yagoda 2009, p.62); to Mills forswearing such an endeavour because it would entail "...too much of a betrayal" of loved ones (Mills 2004, p.116). It elucidates what Mills also calls "the rush to judgement" (Mills 2004, p.118) and the recognition that in writing about parents and loved ones "good judgement sometimes resembles not judging" (Barbour 2004, p.73). In other words, to be both memoirist and son, or memoirist and ex-husband, or memoirist and father, requires treading an extremely delicate line between professional obligations and duty of care to one's subjects. Issues of trust and betrayal become paramount with huge implications for what Kramer calls "the integrity of the writer" (Kramer 1995, p.27).

In the Conclusion of this dissertation I answer the question I pose at the outset: *Whose story is it and, if it's mine to tell, do I have a right to answer it if there is a risk of hurt or injury to others by doing so?* My conclusion encapsulates what I was able to discover, both about life writing in general, and the ethics pertaining to such an endeavour in particular. I hope, in the process, I answer my own question, even if that means that the answer might still, in part, be unresolved – that it may be my story, and I may have every right to write it, but that Sennett's marker of "good character" could end up trumping the rush to create "good work" (Sennett 1998, p.21), in good time. I hope to create a useful contribution to the canon of life writing in general, and patriography in particular.

### **Research Question(s)**

I have many. But the main ones are: whose story is this and do I have any right to tell it? And even if this is my story to write, what pain and/or injury might be

caused by my insistence on that right? I have been grappling for months with trying to come up with these research questions and I believe I can now address them in a satisfactory manner. It begins with my father's story, and then intersects and overlaps with stories about my mother, former wife, daughters and, to a lesser extent, siblings. It also explores questions of Jewish identity and the Middle Eastern conflict, as well as journalism and publishing. I believe what I am actually bringing to the canon is a patriographic hybrid story of a father who was famous in the publishing industry, written by a son with his own public profile. As Couster suggests:

...such narratives do significant work, both individually and collectively.

One of the fundamental capabilities of memoir is that it can endow its subject(s) with a degree, or kind, of immortality. Now, seeking to immortalize oneself by writing a memoir is not necessarily a noble endeavour. But when memoirs immortalize someone other than the author, a different sort of impulse is involved (Couster 2012, p.79).

### **About the Creative Component**

I wrote a memoir about my life and family with what felt like a gun cocked and loaded at my head. My father was alive and watching during the years it took me to lay his life – and mine – down on the page. He was a man who had lived a considerable life – an escapee from Nazi Germany who went on to become a magazine publisher working at the top of his profession on four continents.

He had only known success in his adult life – the success of starting Australian *Vogue* from its inception in 1959, and then *Vogue Living* thirteen years later. The success of being asked to head Condé Nast's operations in London in 1976, and to then launch German *Vogue* in 1979, forty years after he'd fled his Fatherland. The success of hiring editors like Tina Brown, Harold Evans and Anna Wintour to spearhead some of the company's most prestigious titles – *Vanity Fair*, *Condé Nast Traveler* and American *Vogue* respectively. The success of being asked to become President of Condé Nast Publications in New York in 1987, answerable only to the billionaire owner of the private company, the reclusive S.I. Newhouse.

In the years after he left Germany, just before the outbreak of World War II, up until his mid-70s, he was a man accustomed to many accolades, from those who worked alongside him, and those who worked for him. For the most part he'd been, by all reports, a joy to work with – full of brio and enthusiasm for the task at hand and the people charged with carrying it out. He'd swept aside the old hidebound ways at British Condé Nast in the mid-1970s – hell, he'd even kept his door open – and then nearly a decade later, swept into Madison Ave in New York (Condé Nast's then headquarters) like a warm, subtropical breeze.

What was miraculous about this was that my father had somehow been able to recast himself from the sad, diffident German child that he'd been into an international publishing figure with a Churchillian accent, at home in all the esteemed clubs, restaurants and five star resorts of the world.

He had ceased to be the boy whose mother had left the family home when he was three years old because of a scandal with a visiting Czech artist. Nor was he the traumatised young teenager who'd been forced to leave his school because he was Jewish, and then been stiff-armed on the streets of Coburg, Germany in 1938 with Nazis jeering and pelting him with stones and rotten fruit. He was not the exiled German Jew who'd left his homeland hurriedly on the eve of World War II, and then sailed into Auckland harbour with his father to begin his life all over again.

And yet he was all of those things, not to mention many other things as well, and to write about him honestly proved to be the most difficult project I had undertaken as a writer. Not that this should have been a surprise. As Montello writes:

Some of this 'life writing,' as the critics call it, is so disturbing that it raises compelling moral questions about the telling of private stories – our own and those of others close to us. Our shared sense that the stories of others, inextricably part of our own, represent privileged communications raises the question of whether life writing is always a form of trespass (Montello 2006, p.46).

Such was the potential for hurt and transgression in what I might write that I often quailed in the face of allowing my memoir to be published in my father's lifetime, because, like Freadman: "I knew that writing the book would hurt, and I shied away from that. It was much easier to shelve it and to go on with less threatening ... work" (Freadman 2004, p.121). Having said that, even if it was published after his death, I would still be reckoning with the idea that I might dishonour his memory. As Claudia Mills explains:

...while the dead can no longer experience conscious pain, it still seems important to respect at least some of the interests they expressed when they were still living. Joel Feinberg, exploring the puzzle of posthumous interests, writes: 'We can think of some of a person's interests as surviving his death, just as some of the debts and claims of his estate do' (Mills 2004, p.117).

To Mills' credit, perhaps, she chose not to tread where this writer decided, after much hand-wringing, to tread. She writes: "I don't think I could publish a memoir about my family, either my childhood family or my family now...For me, it would be too much of a betrayal; it would cross the line I have drawn for myself" (2004, p.116). She chose instead to offer her loved ones protection through fictionalising their stories, as opposed to the ethical quagmire that memoir invites through its "claim of literal truth" (*ibid*).

This was the major, but far from only, ethical conundrum of this book, and one which I struggled with for years as I attempted to thread my way from my father's birth in Berlin in 1925 to his passing 90 years later – on October 13, 2015. My father was still very much alive at the time my book was published a year earlier and so he was able to read it in manuscript form before it entered the public domain. But even so I was gripped by a dilemma almost identical to that of Richard Freadman: living up to the trust bestowed upon me by my father, whether he was dead or alive. Freadman writes:

He trusted in what might be termed my powers of decency-informed judgement because the implicit trust in question was based on the assumption that I would act in accordance with the ethos of decency to

which he subscribed, and which he believed we shared. He trusted, that is, in my trustworthiness (Freadman 2004, p.132).

This begs the same question Richard Freedman then asked of himself:

I'm not just reviewing the sort of trust my father had in me; I'm also reviewing, even monitoring, my own trustworthiness. I'm asking whether I'm a fit – a decent – recipient of his trust, and how I would need to act in order to be such a recipient (Freedman 2004, p.133).

I was not sure of the answer to this until the act of writing – and reviewing by my father – brought with it much-needed clarity.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Context: my father and his story.**

Although my memoir is about many things, it actually began as a book purely about my father. I was prompted to write a biography of him about fifteen years ago because I felt him unseated and unsettled by his own retirement. My father had always been confident and proud of his considerable accomplishments. He had loved his work in Australia, Europe and America, particularly once he'd ascended the giddy heights of Condé Nast Publications in New York. He'd dined with monarchs and national leaders and been hosted by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat at the Pyramids in Giza and at the royal palace in Fez by Morocco's King Hassan II. He'd worked the corridors of power as assiduously as any political journalist and had taken his vacations in places like Venice and St Moritz and the villa in Cap Ferrat where Somerset Maugham had once lived. An "escape hatch", Maugham had called it in a letter to his nephew, Robin Maugham, "for those burdened with taste".<sup>1</sup>

My father had lived one of the most privileged lives of anyone I'd ever known, but beyond the privileges was something far more important. My father was loved and respected – in equal measure. Loved for his qualities of kindness and warmth; respected for his ability to lead an organisation with a level of emotional intelligence not generally witnessed in business, at least not during the era in which he rose to the international pinnacle of his profession.

Never did this become more in evidence than at his memorial service in New York on December 14, 2015 when his former colleagues and friends poured into the Upper Eastside mansion, Harold Pratt House, to pay their respects. Organised by Leonard Lauder, chairman emeritus of The Estee Lauder Companies Inc, and Anna Wintour, Condé Nast's artistic director, my father's memorial effectively brought together two industry giants for the sole purpose of honouring one man's life. To the best of my knowledge it was the first time either organisation

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ebooklibrary.org/articles/Cape\\_Ferrat](http://www.ebooklibrary.org/articles/Cape_Ferrat)

had been joined in such a fashion. Among those who paid tribute to him were Leonard Lauder and Anna Wintour themselves; Jonathan Newhouse, chairman and chief executive of Condé Nast International; and Shirley Lord Rosenthal, former beauty editor of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Among those in attendance were Tina Brown whom my father had appointed editor of *Vanity Fair* in the late 1980s; her husband Sir Harold Evans who he had similarly hand-picked for the job of founding editor of Condé Nast *Traveler*; Graydon Carter, the current editor of *Vanity Fair*; Donald Newhouse, the co-owner – together with his brother, S.I. Newhouse of Advance Publications, Condé Nast's parent company; Christa Dowling, former editor of German *Vogue*; Peter Thomson, the soon-to-be appointed president of the United Nations General Assembly; family friend and *New York Times* columnist Enid Nemy; international best-selling author Barbara Taylor Bradford and many more. My father had spent weekends in the Hamptons with the *New York Times'* A.B Rosenthal and his wife, Shirley Lord, and had been on friendly terms with Helen Gurley Brown, and Evelyn and Leonard Lauder of the Estee Lauder family. From 1959 until 1994 his life had become inseparable from the company he had served, and in 2015 at this memorial service he was given the public honours he had deserved – and craved – especially given the nature of his removal as President of the company in 1994.

This 'removal' had a profound and devastating effect on him because he only learned about it in a phone call from S.I. Newhouse while travelling in the Far East. Newhouse possessed many fine qualities but knowing how to dismiss arguably his most faithful lieutenant was never going to be his strong suit. While sitting in his Tokyo hotel room my father had taken a call from Newhouse, in New York, in which Newhouse informed him there would be a story the following day in the *Advertising Age* announcing my father's resignation as President. My father laughed and told Newhouse just to deny the rumours, as he had done on numerous occasions. Newhouse told him the rumours were true, causing my father to slam the phone down on his chairman. And so my parents arrived back in Australia in 1994 with my father given the new title of managing director for Condé Nast Asia-Pacific. It sounded impressive but the truth was far less appealing. At the age of nearly 70 he was now going to be answerable to S.I

Newhouse's first cousin, Jonathan Newhouse, a man 30 years younger and someone who had often looked to my father as his mentor. My father remained in that job for three years before resigning to take up other challenges, including working as a senior adviser and chairman of Eric Beecher's Text Media Group in Melbourne; while also serving on the Australian National Gallery Council and the Council for St Vincent's Centre for Immunology. He enjoyed these roles but never with the same relish he had shown during his years with Condé Nast.

By 2002, my father began to sink into depression and all of us, family and friends, were deeply concerned about him. Many lifelong friends had died, people no longer sought him out for advice, his body was beginning to crumble, and, increasingly, self-medication with scotch or vodka – his preferred drinks – seemed the only worthwhile endeavour. His conversations invariably revolved around Condé Nast, the major milestones of his career; the people he'd befriended; the careers he'd helped propel forward; the standards of excellence he'd inspired; and, by contrast, the conspicuous shortcomings of the post-modern workplace with its obsessive reliance on non-verbal text and email communications.

My father loved to deal with people directly. He relished the personal touch. However his propensity to rehearse and recount his glory days, endlessly, often painfully, did him little justice, and, if truth be known, tended to diminish him in my eyes. I wanted him to stop living in the past, to start appreciating his achievements, his grandchildren, his new opportunities, and to begin exploring other endeavours. I wanted this for him, but I also – unconsciously I suspect – wanted this for myself. For my father to express and define himself in other ways so that I, too, could emulate him as a man to be admired, not just for what he accomplished in his professional life, but for how he fathered his children, fostered friendships, gave to charities, explored new ideas, embraced change.

These were harsh thoughts, and I committed them to the page with some reluctance because I agreed with Mills who writes:

The rush to judgement here can be too quick and easy ... For the most part, they (our parents) are flawed, sad human beings who did the best they could in difficult circumstances. All parents, in particular, need to be viewed through the lens of pity (2004, p.118).

In the last few years of my father's life I was filled with sorrow for him. In 2012 he visited me in Byron Bay for what I sensed would be the last time in which he would enter my own home. He could barely walk, and only then with a walker. His hearing had almost gone, along with his once powerful will to live. When we sat together with my mother over dinner, his head was bowed for much of the meal. When he looked up, it was with rheumy, far-away eyes. He barely touched his food. At night he managed to still read – mostly biographies – which had often been the case – but on most days he didn't surface until 5 pm, and only then, it would seem, by some stupendous act of determination. He knew he was leaving us soon, and I could feel his immense sadness at having to say goodbye to all the people he cherished, and who cherished him.

When I asked him how he was feeling he replied that things were difficult but he was in no pain. He then looked at me with the most tender, loving expression and said: "Often when I'm depressed I take out the letter you wrote me a few years ago. It makes me feel better." It was a letter I'd written him after having done a week-long retreat called the Hoffman Process. At the end of the retreat I'd gone to my mother's cottage in Federal, in northern New South Wales, and in the middle of a wild storm, with the electricity down and the candles flickering throughout the house, I'd written him a long letter – a love letter in fact – in front of a blazing fire. I wanted to thank him for all that he had done for me, and for the man that he was, and to fill him up, I suppose, with only sweet, sustaining memories. There was one point in my letter where I reminded him of our trip to Germany in 1987, two years before the Berlin Wall had come down:

*Do you remember Dad the first time we went there? The Wall was still up and we had to go through Checkpoint Charlie. We ate a hotdog somewhere in the West and had a photograph taken of us doing so. We both ate simultaneously from either end and I think you got there first, mustard and*

*ketchup all over your chin. Then we drove from Berlin down to Sondershausen, via Potsdam and Coburg, to the town where you grew up, and from where you fled in April 1939.*

*You introduced me to Gerhard, your childhood friend. You showed me the house you grew up in on Von Hindenburg Strasse. You shared with me the stories of your youth – sad, broken stories that I took deep into my soul and that I carry to this day, although no longer with the same pain. Thank you for sharing your history, my history, with me. Thank you for explaining to me where I came from* (Leser 2014, pp. 289-290).

My memoir contains further epistolary entries from family members as a way of authenticating their voices but, in the case of my father, it is a voice that, at the time, was faltering before my very eyes.

And so today, after undertaking this long process of investigation and dissertation, I understand much better why my father strapped himself so tightly to the Condé Nast mast. He'd lost so much so early. He'd been the only child of six marriages, my grand-parents each having taken three partners during the course of their lives. As a young boy he'd had a cousin whom he treated as a brother, and vice versa, but he'd lived largely without friends and siblings in a large house, in a dark, forbidding corner of south-eastern Germany up until the time he'd been forced to flee. He'd never known the institutional protection that a school or university could offer, let alone a community or country. His father, my grandfather, had loved him deeply but had always been a remote figure, constantly in pain from the injuries he'd sustained during World War 1. Into that breach stepped a coterie of governesses, maids and chauffeurs, but that never made up for the fact that no one played with my father at school, with the notable exception of his friend, Gerhard Braun, who let him know – repeatedly – that despite the edicts of being seen with Jews, he, Braun, was going to ignore them.

Gerhard Braun was to outlive my father. In 2016 – at age ninety – he was still living in Sondershausen and in 2013 – two years before my father died – I

travelled there to learn what I could about the times he'd shared with my father in the lead-up to World War 11. Somehow Gerhard had survived the Nazis, and then for the four decades that followed, the brutality of the East German Communist State and its notorious secret police agency, the Stasi.

Throughout this time Gerhard Braun made sure that the small Jewish cemetery where my ancestors were buried – my great grandfather, Arthur Leser, my great-great grandfather, Moses Leser, and my great, great, great grandfather, David Leser – was well tended; and that the gates were securely locked at night. I still have the photo of my father and me – at age twenty-eight – standing by the grave site of my great-great grandfather David Leser who died in 1871. My hair is thick and black, my father's thick and grey, and we are both wearing yamulkes, looking very much like two Semitic men standing in the German sod, either side of a patriarch's tombstone. I remember feeling that day a strange sense of belonging, but also recognising that somewhere deep inside my father's German-Jewish heart he had ached all his life to belong. That's what it was. An ache to belong. And I think that's what Condé Nast, with all its vast prestige, wealth, glamour and reach, had been able to give him – a sense of belonging. And what a place to belong to – with the world's leading image makers, story tellers, editors, style queens and dream weavers in his employ, and only one inscrutable, but for the most part, beneficent, Jewish billionaire to report to. Who would not have wanted to keep his throne inside such a palace? So this leavened any harsh judgement I might have been inclined to make in my less charitable moments. As Barbour writes:

...it becomes harder to judge when one realises how various influences shaped a parent's life – including the fact that the parent, too, was once a child reacting to family pressures. If 'tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner' (to fully understand another person is to forgive) the autobiographer may find that the project of life writing makes it difficult to judge. He may recognise that a parent's character was formed by causal influences beyond his control (Barbour 2004, p. 73).

"Good judgement," he writes, "sometimes resembles not judging". He then quotes Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount :

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? (in Barbour 2004, pp.91-2).

I suppose it was out of my love and regret for my father that I first decided to interview him for a book. As a journalist, and particularly, as a profile writer, the interview had often been a comfort zone for me. I knew how to conduct interviews and how to shape them – so a research methodology of narrative inquiry, framed with patriography, was an obvious choice. Initially, though, I wanted him to take up the task himself. I thought that if my father could carve out the time necessary to enter into a new conversation with himself, it might have provided him with a different focus and discipline, perhaps even a nourishing new enterprise. There would be nowhere to go except into this core dialogue with himself, and by doing this he'd be not only making sense of his own life, he'd be inspiring others with a remarkable story of survival and success.

There was also a less pure ambition at work. I had always wanted my father to be proud of me and this desire – buried deep in the sub strata of my psyche – had made me hungry all my life for his love and approval. Similarly, for Richard Freadman, the shadow of his father had fallen on him, and he saw his own attempt at a memoir as a way of resolving some of the transferred inter-generational pain. In an imaginary conversation with his father eight years after his death, Freadman says to him: "If you say that everyone has a core story to tell, a story that lies at the heart of all the stories they're capable of telling, then maybe my relationship with you is my core story" (Freadman 2004, p.140). That had always been my core story too. Despite my arguably more impressive maternal bloodline, the long line of musicians on my mother's side, the high European culture dating back to the eighteenth century in Latvia; despite the exterminations visited on my mother's family, I had always been – perhaps like many sons – more in the thrall of my father than my mother. And perhaps this is the natural patrimony of a father-son, but also, in my case, a sense from very early on that my father needed my endorsement, as much as I needed his; that

there was an isolation, a solitude in my father, that I could perhaps unconsciously save him from. The book that he would write – at my urging – would be a way of addressing this.

But it was not to be, neither in life, nor in book form. Whenever the opportunity came for my father to sit down and begin to write, or even merely to speak into a dictaphone, he prevaricated: “Who would be interested in such a book?” he’d often demur. I never took this seriously. I think he baulked at the task because, for so long, he’d derived far more pleasure from being a social animal, so that the idea of being on his own in front of a blank screen was anathema to him, or at the very least, so unfamiliar as to be frightening. It didn’t help that he never learnt to operate a computer, despite numerous lessons. This is why I decided to take on the task – signing a contract with publishers Pan Macmillan to write a “Father And Son” memoir – and in the process taking a A\$30,000 advance. As the publishers saw it, the book would essentially be the story of my father’s life, as seen through my eyes. It would chart his early days in Germany and then move through the various stages of his career, to the launching of Australian *Vogue* in 1959, his appointment to head up the British operations of Condé Nast in 1976, and then, in 1985, his crowning achievement in becoming President of Condé Nast based in New York. My father has always been desirous of acknowledgement and so, in a sense, I was attempting to spare him what Freadman calls “the indignity of oblivion” (2004, p.140); an oblivion that would be kept at bay for “a generation or two (when) we’re a few faded snaps in a family album, the odd reference in a library catalogue. Then we just vanish” (Freadman 2004, p.140).

I didn’t want my father to just vanish and, therefore, over several weeks, using all my industrially-acquired skills of narrative inquiry, I interviewed him, trying to tease from him the story of his remarkable journey from German Jewish outcast to international publishing colossus. From what I could tell, he enjoyed the process of having the opportunity to frame his life in ways that best made sense to him. He avoided embellishments, especially whenever the conversation turned to Germany. No doubt the German days were difficult for him to talk

about, and I needed whatever skills I possessed to prise them out of him. These were the dramatic episodes of his early life and I realised during these discussions that my father and I were engaged in a sacral act. My father was entrusting – bequeathing to me – his most precious, painful memories, and I believe that our talking like this cemented a bond between us that we were to always cherish. This was not the “false friend” scenario that Malcolm so famously re-rendered (Malcolm 1990, p. 45). This was trust of the highest order between a father and son.

After his initial hesitation about this book, he started to see the merit in it; that for those interested in Nazi Germany, or in the birth of Australian *Vogue*, or in one man’s story of war, escape, exile, migration, ambition and crowning achievement, there might be something worth reading here. My problem with the project was not immediately apparent, but it soon raised its glowering head in the middle of the night. Whose story was I hoping to tell? Was it a story of my father’s life – as seen through my father’s eyes, or was it a story about my father’s life as seen through my own eyes? What if my perceptions differed dramatically from his, which they no doubt would? How would he ever reconcile my view of him with his own view of himself? As Oakley writes:

Lives have particular meanings for the people who live them, meanings which will vary over the life cycle, and they have different sorts of meanings for others who ‘know’ that person and/or who are affected by her/his life (Oakley 2010, p.428).

This seems obvious now in hindsight, but as I began interviewing, writing and thinking about narrative processes, Oakley’s views took on gravitas and became, in effect, the heart of my project. What might this memoir do to a relationship we both placed such high store in? How much was I prepared to say in the interests of full and frank disclosure? What kind of breach of trust would this constitute if I ventured on regardless? What kind of journalistic compromise would it entail if I did not?

As written above, Oakley writes: "It is important for biographers to be clear about why they are interested in particular life-stories. The text of a written biography is the product of two biographies – that of the writer and the person written about" (Oakley 2010, p.431). She draws on Greenway (2008) and Kearns (1981) when she writes: "The balance between the two is one of the least discussed but most important methodological challenges of biographical life-writing" (Oakley 2010, p.431). I have discovered that finding this balance was what ultimately defined my work – ethically being able to live with the final output as a true rendering to the page of my understanding of both myself and my father. Oakley asks a pertinent question: "...what is allowable may not be relevant, and what is relevant may not be appropriate. The question for biographers is, what right do they have to pursue their subjects to the most private corners of their lives?" (Oakley 2010, p.432).

It was not until early 2010, just after my marriage had broken down, long after I had put the manuscript down and – needless to say, spent the publishers advance – that I decided the only way I could write my father's story was to also write my own. It had been eight years since I'd accepted the advance; eight years in which I'd written three or four chapters of my father's life story before assigning it to the bottom drawer; eight years since I'd first began despairing at the task of writing a straight biography on the man who had given me my own autobiography. Every time I thought about the book I felt physically ill. I lost all desire to write just his story alone, to spend whatever spare hours I had pouring over my father's life at the expense of actually living my own. I had grown weary of writing constantly about other people for various magazines. I had grown tired also of hearing the same stories from my father. By late 2009 – when I left my marriage, initially as a trial separation – I had been a journalist for thirty-one years. I had absorbed much about the world and believed that I, too, had things to say about life and the human condition. Plus, I now had a tight ball of grief for my father lodged deep inside me and I felt that the act of writing a different story, a father-son story skewed towards the son's voice, might actually help rescue the book from oblivion, as well as provide a balm for me. And so this is what I began to do in the early winter of 2010.

## Chapter 2

### An historical and ethical discussion

The history of memoir is arguably as old as the Bible, that is if any of the personal details contained in both the Psalms of David (*Old Testament*) and Paul's testimony in Acts 26: 1-5 (*New Testament*), can be said to be reliable.

In his history of memoir, Ben Yagoda (2009) points to these seminal Biblical figures – and their passages in both the Good Books – as possibly the first examples of the written word containing autobiographical elements. And this despite the many doubts amongst modern religious scholars about their authorship, particularly with respect to the psalms of the Jewish King.

Nonetheless, the impulse to set down in writing the personal recollections of the writer may have begun in ancient Palestine three thousand years ago and continued with the Roman conquests and the various personal testimonies of their emperors, none of which were to survive, with the notable exception of Julius Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic Wars, written around 50 BCE. "In our fathers' times," says Tacitus, "many men counted it not presumption, but self-respect, to narrate their own lives" (in Yagoda 2009, p.31) although Julius Caesar, "anticipating Henry Adams and Norman Mailer" would refer to "himself in the third person" (Yagoda 2009, p.32). After the Romans it takes another nearly 450 years for the next memoir-ofsorts to leave its indelible mark, and this particular act of bearing witness would come to define everything that followed, including today's ocean wave of printed confessions now dominating the publishing landscape.

Confessions are exactly what they were after Augustine of Hippo set out between CE 397 and CE 398 to chronicle what he saw as his lapsed and sinful life, and his journey from inner turmoil to salvation. He did this by placing before his ultimate judge – the reader – his life of "dark desires". *The Confessions of St Augustine* is a thirteen-book act of atonement and it is the earliest example of the autobiography emerging as an exercise in religious rationale, with the writer seeking redemption through an act of writing and, in this case, an appeal to God. This "remarkable autobiography...stands like a lone literary skyscraper in a vast

flat medieval landscape” of the fifth century and its catalyst was the youthful misdemeanour of stealing pears from a pear tree and feeding them to pigs (Yagoda 2009, p. 32). “I and a group of wanton boys went to shake and steal the fruit from the tree,” St Augustine writes (St Augustine 1993, p. 35). He continues:

We carried off a great load of pears. While we ate a few, most we flung to swine: we had stolen not to eat but from an appetite for doing what was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart; yet you had pity on it in the bottomless pit (ibid).

St Augustine’s desire to seek penance through the act of writing anticipated Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* nearly 1400 years later, although unlike St Augustine who directed his confessions toward an all-seeing, all-knowing God, the Swiss philosopher addresses his to his far less forgiving fellow man. Rousseau writes:

I will speak the truth, I will do so unreservedly; I will tell everything; the good, the bad, everything, in short ... The reader has only to take me at my word and begin to read; he will not get far before seeing that I mean to keep it (in Yagoda 2009, pp. 59-60).

Indeed, like St Augustine, who confesses to everything from stealing from his parents’ cellar and not paying enough attention to his Greek studies, to giving full rein to “the madness of lust” (St Augustine 1993, p.32) and his conversion to Manichaeism, Rousseau doesn’t hold back from his desire “to perform a total and uncensored act of self-disclosure” (Eakin 1999, p.143). The reader learns of his youthful penchant for masturbation and his sexual arousal from being spanked by a minister’s wife, declarations which so scandalised his listeners that when he read his audience passages from the text, one petitioned the police to prevent further readings (Yagoda 2009, p. 60). But it was the seemingly more banal infraction of stealing a ribbon as a young boy – and then blaming it on his family’s employed cook – that led Rousseau to engage, forty years later, in one of history’s most famous acts of writing-as-therapeutic-purge. He writes:

At times I am so troubled by this cruel memory, and so distressed, that I lie sleepless in my bed, imagining the poor girl advancing towards me to reproach me for my crime as though I had committed it only yesterday (Yagoda 2009, p.61)

Rousseau's critics might have preferred the philosopher take a medicinal rather than trouble his readers with his "cruel memory" given that after the book's publication in France in 1782 (four years after the philosopher's death) and the following year its appearance in English, reviewers were decidedly underwhelmed by its bold candour. As Yagoda points out, one early reviewer described the book as "an incredible tissue of puerility, folly and extravagance" (Yagoda 2009, p. 61) while Edmund Burke, Irish author, orator and philosopher, described Rousseau as "the insane Socrates of the national assembly" who had been "impelled to publish a mad confession of his mad faults" (Stanlis 1991, p. 174).

These criticisms foreshadow the widespread disapproval and outright condemnation of many memoirists' works 200 years later when the Rousseauian act of self-disclosure turned into a multi-million dollar boom industry of confession, victimhood and prurience. The "Age of Memoir", as it is called. Michel Foucault flags it two decades earlier: "...we have...become a singularly confessing society" (Foucault 1978, p. 59). William Gass is unimpressed. He writes: "Why is it so exciting to say, now that everyone knows it anyway, 'I was born ... I was born ... I was born'? 'I pooped my pants, I was betrayed, I made straight A's'" (Gass 1994, pp. 43-52). But as Yagoda points out, Rousseau's *Confessions* assumed the shape of a classic precisely because it altered the landscape of autobiography with its degree of self-revelation. Yagoda writes:

At least four principles embodied in the book are so commonplace among contemporary memoirists as to go without saying, but were revolutionary at the time: a belief in total frankness and honesty; an emphasis on the inner life of the mind and emotions rather than on the external one of action; a significant attention to childhood and youth; and a recognition

that mundane matters, like a lie about a ribbon, could be as earthshaking as a grand battle, maybe even more so (Yagoda 2009, p.62).

Between the religious and secular confessions of St Augustine and Rousseau respectively, there were many other chronicles and confessions that pre-dated what we would eventually come to understand as memoir. That is, the story from a life, as opposed to the story of a life. Or as Gore Vidal would differentiate in his own memoir, *Palimpsest*: “How one remembers one’s own life,” compared to the autobiographical rendering of “history, requiring research, facts, dates, double-checked” (Vidal 1995, p.5).

More than any other writer in recent times, Ben Yagoda has sought to document the historical rise (and triumph?) of the memoir and his opening chapter is littered with the “million little subgenres” that populate the universe of the memoir – dog memoirs, cat memoirs, owl memoirs, childhood memoirs, parental memoirs, soldier memoirs, survival memoirs, ‘growing up on methamphetamines’ memoirs, slave memoirs, immigrant memoirs, Holocaust memoirs, rockstar memoirs, wannabe rockstar memoirs, political memoirs, sports memoirs, celebrity memoirs, spiritual memoirs and an entire mini industry of misery memoirs and downright fraudulent memoirs (Yagoda, 2009, p. 21). He writes: “All the memoirs I’ve mentioned have one thing in common: they were evaluated, accepted, physically produced and marketed by a publishing house,” Yagoda writes, and they were indicative of legions of people displaying “an urge, or need, to put their lives before the world” (Yagoda, 2009, pp.19-20). But, as we’ve seen, the urge was there from the time of King David’s Psalms and the Acts of Paul and it began to firm its grip during the post-Augustine Middle Ages with Geoffrey of Villehardouin’s account of the Battle for Constantinople in 1204; Jean de Joinville’s personal testimony of life during the reign of Louis IX (1214-1270), in particular the Seventh Crusade; and Phillippe de Commynes memoirs of life during both the reign of Louis XI and the Italian Wars of 1494 to 1498. His book was first published in Paris in 1524 (Yagoda, 2009, p. 31). Yagoda, however, points to the twelfth century theological Peter Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum (The Story of My Misfortunes)* as one of the more seminal works of

this period, not only for how it reveals the writer's physical and mental distress, but for how it also anticipates today's chronicles of gloom. Writing as consolation, not just for the writer but for the reader. As Abelard writes: "In comparing your sorrows with mine, you may discover that yours are in truth nought, or at the most but of small account, and so shall you come to bear them more easily" (Yagoda 2009, p. 34). Given that Abelard was referring to his castration as punishment for a romantic liaison with a canon's niece, he could hardly be accused of exaggerating.

Yagoda then meticulously surveys the arc of autobiographical writing throughout the next 900 years, beginning with *The Book of Margery Kempe*,<sup>2</sup> crediting this text as arguably the first autobiography published in English. Written in the 1430s, it is considered the first – and best – insight into female life during the Middle Ages, at once both a spiritual meditation and a social exploration of fifteenth century English Christian society (Yagoda 2009, p. 34).

After Kempe, Yagoda moves on to Pope Pius II's Commentaries – a manifestation, much like the development of the glass mirror at the end of the fifteenth century – of Renaissance Europe's humanistic impulse to begin holding the mirror up to oneself. He writes: "Dante, Petrarch, Montaigne, Erasmus, Shakespeare, John Donne, and virtually all other important Renaissance writers reflected on themselves in such forms as diaries, personal essays, literal self-portraits in poetry ... and veiled ones in fiction or drama" (Yagoda 2009, p.36).

The two most striking examples of Renaissance autobiography, Yagoda writes, belong to two Italians – the Florentine goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, author of *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini*, and his Milanese counterpart – philosopher, physician and mathematician Girolamo Cardano whose *Book of My Life* left no part of his life to the reader's imagination. Accordingly, Gass' comments more than 400 years later, as mentioned above: "I was born ... I was

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<sup>2</sup> Dictated by Margery Kempe

born ... I pooped my pants," (Yagoda 2007, p. 4) is an appropriate response to Cardano's unblinking conviction of his own self-worth. Cardano writes:

I am a man of medium height; my feet are short, wide near the toes, and rather too high at the heels, so that I can scarcely find well-fitting shoes; it is usually necessary to have them made to order. My chest is somewhat narrow and my arms slender. The thickly fashioned right hand ... (Cardano 2002, p. 18).

While perhaps less narcissistic than Cardano, Benvenuto Cellini is no less self-justifying when he dips his lid to all future memoirists with this exquisite rationale at the beginning of his book: "All men of whatsoever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence, or which may properly resemble excellence, ought, if they are persons of truth and honesty, to describe their life with their own hand" (Cellini 1910, p. 1). There is vainglory enough in both these examples of rampant self-examination but during the same period there were also numerous spiritual autobiographies, particularly Protestant ones like Paul Delany's *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* and William Perkins's *The Golden Chain*, both of which seem to answer John Calvin's directive for the faithful to examine themselves and to find fault with whatever they find. He writes: "We cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves" (in Yagoda 2009, p. 39).

It was not until the mid-1600s, however, that personal accounts – or "conversion narratives" as the Puritans would describe them – began to proliferate (Yagoda 2009, p. 40). The English Civil War of 1642-1651 was over and for the first time the newly popularised printing press was unleashing a commotion of competing voices – from Presbyterians, Baptists and Quakers to the less well-known Diggers, Ranters and Seekers. As Yagoda writes: "There was a sense among believers that Christ's return to earth was imminent, which was all the more reason for as many of them as possible to tell their stories in print" (*ibid*).

Just over a century later, Samuel Johnson noted the impact of autobiography because, of all the various forms of narrative, it was the most self-revealing and,

therefore, had the advantage of dependability and accuracy. "Certainty of knowledge not only excludes mistake, but fortifies veracity," Johnson argues rather dubiously (Yagoda 2007, p. 1). That's exactly what Rousseau would end up arguing as he ventured down his uber-confessional path. He writes:

I will speak the truth, I will do so unreservedly; I will tell everything; the good, the bad, everything in short ... the reader has only to take me at my word and begin to read; he will not get far before seeing that I mean to keep it (Yagoda 2009, p. 61).

Rousseau's public striptease found favour in Germany where philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder argued that autobiography was "a window to the soul" and should be published in an anthology so that people might pen "confessions about themselves" (in Yagoda 2009, p. 62). Soon thereafter Johann Georg Muller published his six volume *Confessions of Notable Men* and David Christoph Seybold his two volume *Self-Biographies of Famous Men*. Then came Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who first conceived the autobiographical novel with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) following this with the first volume of his memoirs, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth* and his *Italian Journey* (1848). By writing about his childhood and early youth prior to his departure for Weimar at the age of 26, and then his travels through Italy, Goethe established himself as the originator of the literary memoir, an example that would, in effect, create a movement both in Continental Europe and then across the Channel in England.

By the 1820s a memoir boom was in full swing as evidenced by an article in 1822 in *Edinburgh Magazine* which remarked on "the insatiable appetite of the public for every species of Private Memoirs and Correspondence" (Yagoda 2009, p. 64). From Stendhal's ferocious self-examination in *The Life of Henry Brulard* penned throughout the winter of 1835-6; to William Wordsworth's posthumously published confessional poem, *The Prelude* in 1850; to the notable autobiographies of men like John Stuart Mill and Ulysses S. Grant, memoirs were beginning to proliferate.

But what to call them? “Self-biography,” as D’Israeli called his *Miscellanies* in 1796? Memoir? No, not yet. Too French, too narrow in implied scope. Confessions? Well, if it was good enough for St Augustine and Jean Jacques Rousseau, then it was good enough for Thomas De Quincey (*Confessions of an English Opium Eater* published in 1821); James Hoggs (*Confessions of a Justified Sinner* published in 1824); John Greenleaf Whittier (*The Confessions of a Bachelor* published in 1828); Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington (*Confessions of an Elderly Lady and Gentleman* published in 1838); and Samuel Coleridge (*Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* published posthumously in 1840) (Yagoda 2009, p. 65). And more than 150 years later the attraction of the word would persist with books like John Perkins’ *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* (2004); Daniel Reingold’s *Confessions of a Wall Street Analyst* (2006); Peter Mayle’s *Confessions of a French Baker* (2005); and Karrine Steffans’ *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005) (ibid).

According to Yagoda, the word autobiography had its first citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Yagoda 2007, p.1) in 1797 and “the first recorded instance of memoir-bashing – so familiar now to contemporary readers – came the very next year, from the pen of the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel”(ibid) who writes:

Pure autobiographies are written either by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau’s case; or by authors of a robust artistic or adventurous self-love, such as Benvenuto Cellini; or by historians who regard themselves only as material for historic art; or by women who also coquette with posterity; or by pedantic minds who want to bring even the most minute things in order before they die and cannot let themselves leave the world without commentaries (in Yagoda 2007, para 3).

“In other words,” as Yagoda points out, “memoir writers are egotists, exhibitionists, and/or self-indulgent narcissists. Now where have I heard that before?” (Yagoda 2007, para 4). But the use of the “hateful pronoun” ‘I’ was what sent critics into a lather of indignation, both during the nineteenth century and

on into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries when the Age of Memoir dawned afresh. As Yagoda writes of the backlash in the nineteenth century: "Many reviewers seemed to put autobiographers in the same category as dinner guests who violate decorum by talking incessantly about themselves" (Yagoda 2009, p.67).

By the end of the twentieth century the book that had become the ultimate symbol of the age of the memoir was Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (Zinsser 1998, p.3), a searing account of McCourt's wretched, impoverished childhood in the slums of Ireland during the 1930s and '40s. Both critically acclaimed and an international best-seller, *Angela's Ashes* was published in 1996, nearly six decades after the experiences McCourt recounts in his book, but not through any act of self-importance on McCourt's part; quite the opposite. The idea of self-reflection, or truth-telling-as-confession, was never fostered in McCourt's Ireland, unless alcoholic lubrication prised the secrets free. McCourt says:

We were never encouraged to look inward, or to write about ourselves or our families. You were supposed to think little of yourself. You were forced to look at yourself from the point of view of the church. I simply didn't know that my own experiences were of any value (in Zinsser 1998, p. 21).

McCourt held on to his sense of self-abasement for most of his life, until he became a public school teacher in New York in the late 1950s. He says:

I had left Ireland, this nation of poetic, mercurial, singing people who are all inhibited until they drink, and I didn't know anything about 'connecting,' as we say nowadays. Human relations. The human heart. I knew nothing about that (in Zinnser 1998, p. 22).

It was only through the encouragement of his high school students that McCourt discovered enough about the human heart to write *Angela's Ashes*. His students became his teachers and from their instruction a masterpiece was born. "It is a powerful lesson for anyone setting out to write the story of his or her life," Zinnser writes (*ibid*).

Until the 1990s – and perhaps until the arrival of *Angela's Ashes* – memoir writers tended to:

...stop short of harsh reality, cloaking with modesty their most private and shameful memories. Today, no remembered episode is too sordid, no family too dysfunctional, to be trotted out for the wonderment of the masses in books and magazines and on talks shows (Zinnser 1998, p. 3).

The stunning achievement of McCourt's memoir was, firstly, that he was able to survive the squalor and trauma of his life and, secondly, that he was able to “triumph over it ... by beating back the past with grace and humour and with the power of language” (Zinnser 1998, p. 4). “Those same qualities,” writes Zinnser, “are at the heart of all the good memoirs of the 1990s” (ibid). He lists books such as Pete Hamill's *A Drinking Life* (1994), Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* (1995) and Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* (1993). He writes:

If these books ... represent the new memoir at its best, it's because they were written with love. They elevate the pain of the past with forgiveness, arriving at a larger truth about families in various stages of brokenness. There's no self-pity, no whining, no hunger for revenge (ibid).

Not so, many of the other memoirs that poured into the market place during the late nineties and early part of the twentieth century as part of the new-found “national appetite” for true confession. Zinsser writes:

(This appetite) has loosed a torrent of memoirs that are little more than therapy, the authors bashing their parents and wallowing in the lurid details of their tussle with drink, drug addiction, rape, sexual abuse, incest, anorexia, obesity, co-dependency, depression, attempted suicide, and other fashionable talk-show syndromes (Zinsser 1998, p. 5)

The titles depict it: Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss: A Memoir* which details Harrison's long-time incestuous relationship with her living father (Yagoda 2009, p. 236); Martin Duberman's *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey* (1991); Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive* (1995); Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (1994); Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation: Young and*

*Depressed in America* (2001); Susanna Kaysen's *Girl Interrupted* (2000). Yagoda writes: "Not much happy talk here: These books chronicled dysfunction, abuse, poverty, addiction, mental illness, and/or bodily ruin (Yagoda 2009, p. 228).

The seemingly unstoppable charge of the so-called "misery memoir" is said to have begun in 1995 with Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"* detailing Pelzer's extraordinary abuse at the hands of his alcoholic mother and leading to a mini industry of Pelzer sequels and self-help books (de Bertodano, 2005).

Pelzer was then joined by Frank McCourt and a whole new generation of stable mates chronicling the sufferings of their impoverished, depressed, addicted and abused lives. Sanghera writes in *The Times*:

The titles of recent publishing successes sound like the cries you would hear if you opened the very doors of Hell. *Tell Me Why, Mummy: A Little Boy's Struggle to Survive; No One Wants You: A True Story of a Child Forced into Prostitution*. And who could forget Stuart Howarth's *Please, Daddy, No*, in which the author recalls how he was repeatedly raped by his father, forced to scoff pigswill and abused by paedophiles before becoming a cocaine addict, an arsonist and, finally, killing his father (Sanghera 2008).

And yet for all their ubiquity – and popularity – these so-called misery memoirs are just one corner of an expanding universe of self-investigation and soul-bearing. There are celebrity memoirs featuring bona fide stars such as Barbara Walters, Tony Curtis, Ted Turner and Sidney Poitier, but also memoirs from teenage pop star/actresses like Mylie Cyrus who penned her own self-portrait at the age of sixteen, becoming, in the process, purportedly the second-youngest person to ever publish an autobiography (Yagoda 2009, p 10). Cyrus's self-regard, however, was more than matched by 1970s child actor Mason Ree who published a book at the age of nine, as did Slumdog Millionaire star Rubina Ali at the same age with her memoir in 2009, *Slumgirl Dreaming: Rubina's Journey to the Stars* (*ibid*). The difference with Ali was that she donated all her royalties to a French medical aid association (Pous 2012).

There is also “shtick lit” – the name given to books undertaken by authors whose express purpose is to survive unusual, but usually contrived, circumstances. This sub-genre was first put to the test by nineteenth century writer Henry David Thoreau in his memoir, *Walden*, an account of his two years living in a cabin in the woods of Walden Pond, Massachusetts (Yagoda 2009, p 11). Throughout the next century a number of writers took up his example – Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903) with the writer posing as an indigent in the East End of London; John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961) with the writer, a white native of Dallas, Texas, posing as a black man; George Plimpton’s *Paper Lion* (1966) with Plimpton masquerading as a professional footballer and Norah Vincent’s *Self-Made Man: One Women’s Journey into Manhood and Back* (2006) where Vincent feigned being a man (*ibid*).

These literary turns-in-the-air became even more outlandish with writers like A.J. Jacobs attempting to live for a year in accordance with the strict moral codes of the Bible and then producing an account of that period entitled *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Attempt to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (2007). This was three years after publication of his New York Times bestseller, *The Know-It-All: One Man’s Humble Quest to Become the Smartest Person in the World* (2004), a humorous account of his efforts to live up to the title of the book by reading all 32 volumes of the 2002 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. And was it the quest itself or the writing about the quest that saw books like *A Year Without “Made in China”: One Family’s True Life Adventures in the Global Economy* (2008); *Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping* (2006); *The Big Turnoff: Confessions of a TV-Addicted Mom Trying to Raise a TV-Free Kid* (2007), vying for readers’ attention (Yagoda 2009, p.12). Probably a bit of both, although Elizabeth Gilbert’s huge international best-seller, *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) proved that, if written well, there is no sating the memoir appetite (*ibid*).

How different, though, were the impulses behind these memoirs than those that propelled the stories of, say, black Americans and Holocaust survivors to relive their experiences on the page. From the mid to late 1960s African American memoir led the charge in the United States, most notably with the publication of

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, shortly after the black Muslim leader's assassination in 1965. The book was co-authored by Alex Haley who, eleven years later, published his own searing account of black American life called *Roots* (1976) (Yagoda 2009, p. 216), originally regarded as a 'factual' representation of his family, later proven to be fictional. The black American experience was the viewing platform from which numerous writers painted their own portraits of grief as a way of giving voice to – and perhaps even healing themselves from – the shuddering events of their lives.

This was even more so in relation to the Holocaust, arguably the most monstrous event in modern history. In 1946 Viennese psychiatrist-turned-author, Viktor Frankl published *Man's Search for Meaning*, his autobiographical account of his survival of four concentration camps, including Auschwitz. He writes:

In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom (Frankl 1984, p. 47)

The search for meaning in the face of the Nazi regime's incalculable crimes gave rise to an abundance of first person accounts from survivors, perhaps none more important than Frankl's tour de force and his Italian counterpart, Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* in 1948 which, after an initial small print run of 2,500 eventually became a classic. Both books attempt to describe the indescribable at a time when Europe was still limping its way out of the catastrophe into which it had been plunged.

Of all the Holocaust writers, however, Eli Wiesel, the Romanian-born Jewish-American professor, became arguably the most widely read, penning 57 books, including *A Jew Today* (1978) where he spelt out his reasons for giving

expression – and not giving expression to his experiences (Yagoda 2009, p. 222-3). He writes:

I knew the role of the survivor was to testify. Only I did not know how. I lacked experience. I lacked a framework. I mistrusted the tools, the procedures. Should one say it all or hold it all back? Should one shout or whisper? How does one use restraint in re-creating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the Gods? And then, how can one be sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear? So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years (in Yagoda 2009, pp. 222-3).

No such restraint, however, to be found in the surfeit of father memoirs, gay memoirs, rock star memoirs, political memoirs, religious/spiritual memoirs, anti-religious memoirs, tit-for-tat memoirs (ex CIA agent Valerie Plame Wilson's *Fair Games: My Life as a Spy, My Betrayal* (2007) by the White House vs the columnist who blew her cover Robert Novak and his memoir, *The Prince of Darkness: 50 Years Reporting in Washington*, also published in 2007) and literary memoirs that have flowed forth in recent years. These have been aided and abetted by an avaricious publishing industry, rampant new technology in the form of social media and a proliferation of memoir writing courses that tap into the modern day urge to "put their lives before the world" (Yagoda 2009, p. 20). The problem was – and is – that some of these lives proved to be fraudulent, such that they called into question the very notion of truth or "truthiness" as *New York Times* columnist, Frank Rich would describe it (Rich 2008).

Arguably the most notorious of these books was James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, a memoir of Frey's 23 year-old alcoholism, drug addiction and twelve-step recovery program. First published to modest reviews in 2003, it then found itself in the literary stratosphere two years later thanks to its selection by Oprah Winfrey in her all-powerful "Oprah Winfrey Book Club". Describing *A Million Little Pieces* as a "gut wrenching memoir" (Oprah's Book Club, September 2005) she was unable to put down, Oprah was forced to reassess her fulsome praise three months later when an investigative Website, *The Smoking Gun* (TSG),

revealed much of the book to be a fabrication. In an article entitled *A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction* TSG shredded Frey's newly won reputation with a forensic account of his inventions and lies, claiming police reports, court records and interviews with law enforcement authorities showed categorically he had "wholly fabricated or wildly embellished details of his purported criminal career, jail terms and status as an outlaw" (The Smoking Gun, 2006, p.1).

Frey admitted as much three weeks later on the Oprah Winfrey Show, acknowledging that most of what TSG had reported was "pretty accurate," and that he had "made a mistake" by developing – and then exaggerating – his tough guy image in order to cope with his addictions (Trachtenberg 2006). He then enlarged on this theme by talking about the nature of memory and truth in a published letter to *The Wall Street Journal*:

There is much debate now about the respective natures of works of memoir, nonfiction, and fiction. That debate will likely continue for some time. I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. This memoir is a combination of facts about my life and certain embellishments. It is a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering drug addict and alcoholic (Trachtenberg 2006).

This raises more questions than it answers, not the least of them being why Frey's publisher, Random House, convinced Frey to market his book as non-fiction when Frey had initially presented his work to various publishers as fiction. Was it merely for pecuniary gain? As a 2006 *Los Angeles Times* editorial points out: "From today's vantage point, it's harder to know which is worse: a writer who acts as though there is no distinction between a novel and a memoir, or a publisher who does not care" (Dahmen 2009). As *Washington Post* columnist Kathleen Parker notes:

...it is clear ... that Frey fictionalized much of the book and that Doubleday (a division of Random House) advanced a memoir that should have raised

flags. Does it matter? In a hundred different ways, it matters. One of the ways in which it matters, of course, is the effect on public trust; thus, once again indicating the connection to journalism. If publishers can get away with marketing fiction as non-fiction simply because fudged facts sell better than reliable ones, what is to become of history? What is to become of serious journalism? Audiences are confused enough about whether they should trust major media without book publishers adding to the confusion (Parker 2006).

But the confusion was only just heating up. At the same time as James Frey's 'memoir' was attracting the hurricane of criticism, another book claiming similar authenticity was managing to fly under the radar. The book, *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams: A Memoir*, was written by an individual known as Nasdijj who claimed to be Navajo with the "literary lineage" of the Athabaskans. In fact, Nasdijj turned out to be a Caucasian man from North Carolina by the name of Timothy Barrus whose previous literary works comprised mainly gay fiction and erotica (Yagoda 2009, p. 21-2).

Then came a \$2 million lawsuit in 2007 directed against Augusten Burroughs, author of the memoir, *Running with Scissors*, by a family that claimed to have been defamed by Burroughs' account of their home life, including the condoning of sexual affairs between children and adults and the mother being prone to eating dog food. Although the financial terms of the settlement were not revealed, Burroughs and his publisher, St. Martin's Press, eventually publicly agreed to call the work a book rather than a memoir (Yagoda 2009, p. 24). *New York Times'* writer Frank Rich notes when talking about the James Frey case on Oprah: "We live in this world now ... where anyone can sort of put out something that sort of looks true, smells a little bit like truth, but in fact is fictionalised" (Rich 2006.)

Norma Khouri did this rather consummately with the publication in 2003 of her memoir, *Forbidden Love*, a harrowing account of her best friend Dalia's purported honour killing in Jordan in the mid-1990s. According to Khouri, Dalia, a Jordanian Moslem, had been murdered – stabbed twelve times in the chest – by her father for daring to fall in love with a Catholic Jordanian army officer.

Khouri's account of this gruesome honour killing earned her best-seller status and an unlikely imprimatur from the then US Vice President, Dick Cheney's daughter. By mid to late 2003 she had become a literary diva, appearing on network television across America and at literary festivals around the world.

I know this because I was one of the journalists who interviewed her. Twice – first at the Auckland Writers' Festival in May 2003, then three months later at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival. On both occasions she lied shamelessly to both interviewer and audience, although this only became apparent the following year when Malcolm Knox, the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s literary editor declared Khouri – and her "memoir" to be fake. As Knox writes:

Khouri's real name is Norma Majid Khouri Michael Al-Bagain Toliopoulos, and she only lived in Jordan until she was three years old. She has a US passport and lived from 1973 until 2000 in Chicago. She is married with two children, 13 and 11. She has four American siblings and a mother who are desperate to hear news from her. But she has managed to conceal this double life from her publishers, her agent, lawyers in several continents, the Australian Department of Immigration and, until now, the public (in Leser 2007, p.6).

There was more to come. Khouri had fled the United States in 1999 with her husband, John Toliopoulos, to avoid questioning by the FBI and prosecuted for fraud. In 1998 she was arrested for allegedly bashing her mother-in-law and threatening to kill her – the charges were dropped only when her mother-in-law failed to show up at the trial. At the time of Dalia's so-called honour killing – when Khouri writes she was living in Jordan – she was actually working on various real estate transactions in the Chicago area. At the time, I wrote:

Further revelations continued to flow with the help of the two Jordanian women – Rana Husseini, a prominent journalist, and Dr Amal al-Sabbagh, director of the Jordanian National Commission for Women. The two had discovered 73 lies or exaggerations in the book, amongst them that the unisex salon – which Khouri and Dalia had supposedly been employed by

during the early to mid-1990s – could never have existed by law, nor could it be remembered by any hairdresser in the capital. Within 48 hours of Malcolm Knox's revelations Khouri was on a flight to New York, leaving behind her young children in the care of neighbour and friend, Rachel Richardson. By the end of the week her book had been removed from the shelves (Leser 2007, p.6).

When I contacted Khouri in Chicago in early 2007 I asked her whether she felt any remorse for having duped her readers, publishers, interviewers and audiences. "Of course I feel remorse," she replied. "I've always said I thought I was doing something for the right reason (highlighting honour killings) but I did it in the wrong way" (*ibid*).

## Chapter 3

### Two case studies

#### ***Experience by Martin Amis***

In 2000 British author Martin Amis published his memoir, *Experience*, to widespread acclaim. Son of the famous author, Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis was wading into territory that Couser refers to as “patriography”, a sub-genre of memoir where fathers are written about by their sons (Mansfield 2013, p. 5). This is not easy territory for, as Mansfield notes, the writer son is required to travel in two different directions simultaneously when attempting to write about his father:

At one end of the first spectrum stands the towering presence of the father, the ‘fully realised’ biographical subject of the text through whom the autobiographical self of the son is formed. The identity of the author is created out of his depiction of the father, even when, as in the case of (Edmund Gosse’s) *Father and Son*, it is drawn against or in opposition to the father. In such cases, the father is the enduring presence of the narrative and a reader may favour him over the son, regardless of the author’s intentions. At the other end of that spectrum one encounters the dominant presence of the author-son, the more realised subject of the narrative through whom the author attempts to construct an image of the father. In many cases, even when the portrait is a sympathetic one, the device of foregrounding the autobiographical self seems to be adopted reluctantly, as perhaps the only way to give birth or shape to the reticent figure of the father (Mansfield 2013, p. 8).

In both Martin Amis and my case the father is, indeed, a “towering presence”, although the fame of my father never matched that of the knighted author of more than 20 novels, six volumes of poetry, collections of short stories, a memoir, social and literary criticism and various radio and television scripts. Still, there is

a shared motivation between the writers to “commemorate” the father, even though in Amis’s case, he was writing about his father after his death, as opposed to during his lifetime as I sought to do. Amis describes his impulse:

I do it because my father is dead now, and I always knew I would have to commemorate him. He was a writer and I am a writer; it feels like a duty to describe our case – a literary curiosity which is also just another instance of a father and a son (Amis 2000, p. 7).

The similarities, both significant and trifling, do not end there: both Amis and I wanted to honour our fathers in print. We both are short in stature and hopelessly attracted to beautiful women. We both spent dissolute teenage years smoking dope to the point of near “clinical paranoia” and had a penchant for crushed velvet flared pants (Amis 2000, pp. 13). We both fell in love as teenagers with the melancholic powers of poetry. We both were exposed to the “children of the rich” through our private schooling (*ibid*) and wrote loving letters to our fathers throughout our youth. Neither of us ever was exhorted to follow the professional example of our fathers, nor suffered from a breakdown in relations, despite a father and son’s normal “rows and many hot exchanges” (Amis 2000, p. 24). And both of us exhibited in our early twenties a certitude for which there was no reasonable basis. As Amis writes: “I was twenty-four, and this is the condition: pretending to know everything, while knowing nothing; pretending to be sure, while being always uncertain” (Amis 2000, p. 36).

And with respect to our fathers, neither man had siblings; both were prone to a punctuality which, in Amis’s case, was “Naipulian” (Amis 2000, p. 80) and in my father’s case was merely Teutonic; and both began suffering from a “series of inner ravages” as they grew older. Amis writes:

His articulation was sometimes amorphous; he tilted himself, with that inconvenienced grimace of his, like a smile of pain, and pointed his good ear towards you; he had lost all trust and ease in his body ... Kingsley never mentioned these cerebral ruptures and blockages, these little coups de vieux, and you weren’t supposed to mention (or notice) them either.

When they happened they had the tendency of making him turn away from the world (Amis 2000, pp. 91-2).

In my own father's case, when he was too incapacitated to go out, too hard of hearing to decipher who was saying what to him, he would take himself off early to bed, even on his ninetieth birthday when his family and friends had gathered at home in his honour. A week later he said to me from the living room armchair which has become his only reference point, apart from his bed and the toilet:

I have lived a good life and I am very grateful for all the love I have had from my family and my friends, and for all the pleasure I have derived from my work. This is not easy, growing old like this but I am not in pain. I am also grateful (Leser 2014, p. 289).

He was, in effect, saying he'd had enough and it was well overdue for him to make his exit. He had no fear of his ultimate demise, unlike Kingsley Amis of whom his son writes: "I always knew how it went with him and death, how personally he took it, how viscerally he feared and hated it" (Amis 2000, p. 180).

The power of Amis's memoir lies, however not just in the way he renders his father's character to the page – loving, stern, artistically vibrant, inscrutable, irascible, latter day anti-Semite, gallant, gallant-less, married, divorced, married and divorced again, incapacitated, dying, dead – but in the way he writes about himself, about his own experience, his writings, his loves, his friendships, his torments, his literary heroes (read Saul Bellow) that lends so much gravitas to his work. In this sense, as with my own patriographical project, he is using his famous father as a device for investigating himself, just as C. Martin Redman writes:

In writing the life of his father, the son cannot but write his own self. Indeed, it may be argued that it is in part through the writing of his father that the son forms his own identity. However, in locating himself in relation to his father, the son in effect gives textual birth to the parent – a rather neat literalizing of Wordsworth's 'The Child is the father of Man'. Of course, given that the father transmits to the son his own understanding of maleness and fathering, the son's revision of his father is necessarily

belated: it always looks back, as it were, to the example of the Father (in Mansfield 2013, p. 8).

I cannot speak to how Martin Amis grappled with the ethics of writing about his father, only that some, if not all, the questions pertaining to this sub-genre of life-writing must have applied, as Mansfield writes:

How does one decide what an ethical representation of the father is? What are some of the ethical complexities that must be negotiated when representing the reticent-laconic father in auto/biography? How does the desire to judge or not to judge the father, to condemn or to celebrate, complicate the act of representation? If the father is deceased ... how do notions of regret or debt affect the task at hand? How does the father's death impact upon a reader's judgement of whether an author's representation is ethical? (Mansfield 2013, pp. 10-11).

Amis chose to write about his father's slide towards oblivion after he had met his final oblivion. There were the falls: "...the trips, tumbles and purlers, usually performed in his rooms at home and monitored by my mother and stepfather in the garden flat below" (Amis 2000, p. 283). There were the daily and hourly habits which he feared any disruption to. There was the torpor felt by the son associated with "Dadsitting" – as Amis Jr referred to it (Amis 2000, p. 289). There was the privacy of his father's old age "thickening and deepening around him". The incessant drinking, the shrinking height, the endless demands, the pills and slumbering in his chair, the advancing inner death of dementia. And there was his fear of being alone: "...a grown man who is frightened of the dark" (Amis, 2000, pp. 312), especially after being left by his second wife, English novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard. And then the inevitable arrives, as Amis writes:

And you know you're dealing with experience, with main-event experience, when a cliché grips you with all its original power ... Death is supposed to give nothing back (nothing!), but probably does do that much for the son. In my case death was forthcoming, and literal, showing – screening – my own death in the colours of my father's corpse. Now the

clocks had already changed and I had never faced a dusk so gigantic. 'The King is dead,' I told the telephone (Amis 2000, pp. 358-359).

### **Patrimony by Philip Roth**

Herman Roth was also a "towering presence" in his son, Philip Roth's life, in the sense that all fathers – whether present or absent – are towering presences. But unlike Martin Amis and myself, whose grappling with our fathers were, in part, based on the fame each father achieved in his lifetime, and the implications this had for their sons, Roth's meditations have more to do with his love for – and anxiety over – his father's impending demise.

Published in 1991, Philip Roth's *Patrimony* is as tender-hearted a memoir as one could read about a father-son relationship, written with all the customary verve, humour and compassion of one of America's greatest writers. Herman Roth, a former life insurance salesman, is almost eighty-seven when he is diagnosed in 1988 with a brain tumour, seven years after his wife, Philip Roth's mother, has dropped dead in a New Jersey restaurant. Unlike my own memoir which was published sixteen months before my father's death and was, therefore, exposed to the ethical scrutiny of not just my father but my entire family – *Patrimony* was published two years after Herman Roth's passing whereby Roth senior had no say in his son's written conclusions. And yet, as with my own memoir, much of Roth's jottings were penned while his father was alive and watching. As Roth writes:

In the morning I realised that he (my father) had been alluding to this book, which, in keeping with the unseemliness of my profession, I had been writing all the while he was ill and dying. The dream was telling me that, if not in my books or in my life, at least in my dreams I would live perennially as his little son, with the conscience of a little son, just as he would remain alive there not only as my father but as the father, sitting in judgement on whatever I do (Roth 1991, pp. 237-8).

Like Amis and myself Roth sought to explore the patrimony, the inheritance, of his father's legacy and it was through his approaching expiration that Roth was

able to give voice to his father's lifelong durability, obstinacy and courage, not to mention the son's beautifully articulated sense of dread at the end-of-life ordeals his father was now facing. As Roth writes:

"How long does the operation take?" (my father asked).

"Anywhere," (Dr) Meyerson replied, "from eight to ten hours."

He (my father) managed to take that in without flinching, which was better than I did. Eight to ten hours, then five to six days, and what would he be worth after that? After the impoverished childhood and the limited education, after the failure of the shoe store and of the frozen-food business, after the struggle to gain a managerial role in the teeth of the Metropolitan's Jewish quotas, after the premature deaths of so many loved ones – brothers Morris, Charlie, and Milton in the 1920s and '30s, his young niece Jeanette and his young nephew David and his beloved sister-in-law Ethel in the 1940s – after all that he had weathered and survived without bitterness or brokenness or despair, wasn't eight to ten hours of brain surgery really asking too much? Isn't there a limit? (Roth 1991, p. 115).

What Roth's, Amis's and my memoir have in common is that, unlike most sons who may deliver a eulogy at their father's funeral, often for a man they barely knew, or wished to know better, our father/son stories did not end with our respective fathers' deaths. That's because, as Mansfield writes, we "grew up to be writers. More importantly (we) grew up to write a book of ... patrimony" (Mansfield 2013, p. 2). And the consideration of whether such fathers might be "fortunate or unfortunate for being immortalised in literature" (*ibid*) is, in large part, the focus of Mansfield's pioneering study of patriography, albeit mainly in the Australian context. It is Mansfield's view that books such as ours have not yet reached their apogee because as he writes:

... author-sons will continue to create monuments and tributes to, mount searches and performances for, elucidate defences and denunciations of, and seek dialogue and resolution with their patrimonial inheritances through the act of writing autobiographically (Mansfield 2013, p. 199).

This is what Philip Roth has done with uncanny similarity to my own – attempt to “seek dialogue and resolution with (our) patrimonial inheritances through the act of writing autobiographically” (*ibid*). Just as my father lost the sight of his right eye and a good deal of his hearing towards the end of his life, so, too, did Herman Roth. And just as Herman Roth became increasingly enfeebled in the last years of his life: “...food adhered to his chin without his knowing it” (Roth 1991, p. 13), a level of helplessness descending on “an old person who had once had such vigour” (Roth 1991, p. 123), so it was with my own father in the latter years of his life.

There were stark differences, however, between these two men – Herman Roth and Bernard Leser – not the least of them being that, unlike Roth, my own father never once took to cleaning his own apartment or insisting “on washing his underclothes and his socks” (Roth 1991, p. 26); or that he ever experienced – as Herman Roth quite plainly did - the penury of growing up in a working class Jewish family. But the similarities are numerous, not least their stubborn self-discipline, their growing insecurities – despite all evidence to the contrary – that their life’s savings were insufficient; their “photos in every room of children, grandchildren, daughters-in-law” (Roth 1991, p. 25); the books on the shelves by their author sons; their “anxious, overbearing bossiness” (Roth 1991, p. 36) that seemed to grow in direct proportion to the incremental loss of their faculties. All these qualities these Jewish survivors possessed and that elicited in their sons – Philip Roth and myself – a desire to render each father to the page with as much dignity and honesty as one could muster. And yet in both cases, the more we examined our fathers’ lives – and impending deaths, plunging deeper into the nature of these fierce, primal relationships – the more doubting we became. Here is Roth talking to a family friend, Joanna, in *Patrimony*:

“It’ll be strange and lonely without him. And who understood that?”

“Well you don’t have to understand everything either.”

“I don’t understand anything.”

I took a shower later, repeating those words. I clipped my toenails, sitting at the edge of the bed – the first thing in days I’d been able to concentrate on other than him – repeating those words. Four words again, very, very

basic stuff, but that night, after Joanna had done me the favour of hearing me out, it sounded like all the wisdom in the world to me. I didn't understand anything ... it wasn't that I hadn't understood that the connection to him was convoluted and deep – what I hadn't known was how deep deep can be (Roth 1991, p. 129).

And in my own exploration of my father I came to find myself at sea, not just about my father but about myself and the human condition generally:

Psychology 101, you say? Yes, but then wasn't that the whole point of being alive? Of being conscious? To ask the right questions, not just as a journalist but as a human being? To examine not just other people's dark, cold, self-hating, contradictory, disconnected places, but to examine one's own, given that this was possibly the most uncomfortable inquiry one could ever undertake? To begin to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. To hold opposite sides at the same time, not to rush to one position or another, but to allow disparate ideas to coexist, within ourselves and within others. To begin to know oneself, and to begin to know that we don't know (Leser 2014, pp. 224-5).

And while my memoir positions itself neatly between these two distinguished writers – as all three are attempts to memorialise our fathers – what separates mine from theirs is, firstly, my decision to write, not just about my father, but about other members of my family as well; and then, secondly – and most importantly for the purposes of this exegesis – to adhere to perhaps a more exacting ethical standard by allowing all members of the family, most particularly my father, to read and comment on the manuscript in its unpublished form.

Quite clearly this is something neither Amis nor Roth did and, in Roth's case, this created a tension which Roth was never able to escape and which I wanted to avoid. As Eakin writes:

*Patrimony* ... demonstrates that transgression of privacy is not incompatible with the most profound respect for the integrity of the

person. Roth himself, however, seems to have had a bad conscience about his narrative of his father's last years and illness for he ends the book with a harrowing dream in which the dead father reproaches his son for having buried him not in the business suit of his lifelong vocation but in a shroud. "I had dressed him for eternity in the wrong clothes" (237), Roth observes, whereas his instinct had been to say to the mortician, "Bury him naked" (234). He had, in effect, buried Herman Roth naked in a memoir of *apparently* total candor – this is the heart of the dream – and he interprets the father's "rebuke" as an allusion to "this book ... (which) ... sets the son's "unseemly" practice of life writing on a collision course with the father's right to privacy" (Eakin 1999, p. 182).

Eakin elaborates on the transgressive nature of Roth's memoir by sparing "neither himself nor the reader the progressive intimacy with his father's body that the circumstances of the father's debilitation require" (*ibid*). As Eakin writes:

In an early moment in the narrative Roth contemplates the MRI scan of the tumour in his father's brain: "I had seen my father's brain, and everything and nothing was revealed" (17). In a late episode, helping his father bathe, he studies his father's penis: "I don't believe I'd seen it since I was a small boy" (177). Gradually the taboo of the body of the other is eroded. "Taking his dentures, slimy saliva and all, and dumping them in my pocket, I had, quite inadvertently, stepped across the divide of physical estrangement that, not so unnaturally, had opened up between us once. I'd stopped being a boy" (152) (Eakin 1999, pp. 182-3).

But Roth was not finished. As Eakin writes:

"In the most remarkable sequence in the narrative, an extended and detailed account of the father's exploding bowels after days of postoperative constipation, Roth explores every last crevice of a humiliating experience his father regards as the depth of shame and disgrace. "I beshat myself," he said" (172). Cleaning up the befouled bathroom – "the shit was everywhere ... even on the tips of the bristles of

my toothbrush ... there was a little shit in my hair" (172-5), Roth is never closer to his father's body; mapping every inch of the interpersonal space they share, he works his way through to a stance of acceptance, coming into his own through the body of the other. "So *that* was patrimony ... not the memory ... but the shit" (176). His father had pleaded with him never to tell anyone, whereas Roth pursues a policy of total disclosure – if he is holding anything back, what could it be? (Eakin 1999, p.183).

Eakin is troubled by Roth's transgression, as I am reading it, for how "it poses so starkly the ethical dilemmas of life writing" (Eakin 1999, p. 185). As he writes:

The father's position is absolutely clear: "Don't tell the children," and the son replies, "I won't tell anyone" (176).<sup>3</sup> Yet Roth not only persists in publishing these private things, but even seeks to put an obedient face on this act of disobedience. Thus for the paternal command – "don't tell" – he substitutes another of his own design – "You must not forget anything" – which he attributes ultimately to "*the* father, sitting in judgement on whatever I do" (238).<sup>4</sup> Which command should be observed? Should fidelity to the truth of the son's experience take precedence over the father's right to privacy?

To obey the father, to omit the episode of the shit, is to deny the son the climax of his story, by which I mean not only the rhetorical narrative he is writing but also the psychological narrative of identity formation it recounts. "His story"? Isn't there a legitimate sense, as *Patrimony* boldly asserts, in which the episode of the shit is inextricably relational, belonging at once to father and son alike? Or does the episode merely confirm our misgivings about life writing of any kind, prompting us to recognise that the confessional drive behind life writing that draws us to it – our desire to penetrate the mystery of another person – may also constitute its primary ethical flaw? (Eakin 1999, p. 185).

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<sup>3</sup> *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991) by Philip Roth, Simon and Schuster 1992

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And this is exactly the heart of the dilemma I faced – and sought to resolve – in my own memoir.

## Chapter Four

### Reflection

To be totally honest about my writing I needed to explore deeply my relationships with my father. This in turn forced me to look more closely at myself than I had ever done because as Couser writes: "...all autobiography is also biography; it is virtually impossible to tell one's own life story without representing others" (Couser 2012, p. 99).

Throughout the eight years in which my manuscript gathered dust, other dilemmas also presented themselves. Firstly, there was my mother. Why was it that my father loomed so large in my writings and not her? Why was she confined to the margins and what did this say about me and the patriarchy and the frequency with which the women in men's lives are pushed into the shadows. Didn't I owe it to her to also bring her life – and her presence in my life – more to the page? What about my sister and brother? There was barely a mention of them in my writings, and certainly no cross-referencing about our parents. Didn't I have an obligation to check my views and recollections against theirs? Once again, whose story was it? My father's? My mother's? My siblings? Mine? Or a combination of them all?

There was also my wife. In November 2009 she and I separated after nearly 22 years of marriage. I returned from overseas and announced shortly afterwards that I was moving into my mother's cottage in Federal, in the hills behind Byron Bay, for a trial separation. My wife asked me not to go, despite the fact that it had been she who had suggested via email to me while overseas that we contemplate living separately. So suddenly I found myself in a state of self-banishment up in the green hills and aching silence of northern NSW, weeping inconsolably at night time, taking up smoking again, drinking Irish whisky by a pot belly fire, playing guitar, reading poetry and resuming work on this accursed manuscript. And without having yet properly wrestled my father to the page, I now found myself wanting to examine the reasons for my marriage breakdown, and how, after more than two decades of raising children and living shared lives, we were

two people seemingly lost to each other. What had caused this rupture? How had we stopped meeting each other's needs? Was it possible for two highly career-minded professionals to meet the other person's needs? How could this happen at the very time our children were almost grown up and ready to begin soaring into their new lives? If we'd survived this long, why not a little longer? Had it been an act of courage, or failure of courage to walk out the door? Was there any going back once you'd actually packed your bags and driven away? And could this form part of the book I'd attempted to write eight years earlier – a book that positioned myself between Martin Amis's and Philip Roth's in its desire to understand – and ultimately commemorate – my father; but far more than that, to also write my way into the heart of darkness when it came to the collapse of a modern marriage? Could I do both at the same time? And if I did what kind of permission – if any – did I need to secure from Merran, the mother of my children? Would I need to check my version of events with hers? Surely not, given that our differing versions of events had, in part, led to our very unravelling? Furthermore, would a recounting of a modern marriage's collapse serve the public good, let alone the private? And what of our children? What would they say to such an act of soul-bearing? Would it help or hinder them in their understanding and love of us if they were witness to such a public striptease as this?

So here again was the question: Was this my story, or all our story? And at what price the telling? The ethical dilemmas of life writing cannot be overstated, particularly when it comes to writing about those closest to us. It is one thing to place one's own life before the world for public scrutiny, it's quite another to reveal the private lives of those you love, with or without their consent.

Couser writes: "The closer the relationship between writer and subject, and the greater the vulnerability or dependency of the subject, the higher the ethical stakes, and the more urgent the need for ethical scrutiny" (Couser 2004, p. xii). Couser's study of vulnerable subjects focuses most urgently on those "who are disadvantaged, disempowered, or marginalized with respect to their partners or collaborators" (Couser 2004, p. 15). But what of an ageing father who, for his

entire working life as a publisher, had celebrated, as mine had, the independence of journalists and the separation – as he often called it – between church and state, that is, between management and editorial? Would he allow me the freedom to narrate his life and mine unrestricted? Martin Amis and Philip Roth had both published their works after their fathers had died. Had they received their fathers' permission? I suspect not, although I have no way of proving this. I was planning to publish mine while my father was alive so that he could endorse – with all the faculties still available to him – the product of my labours. Besides which I didn't feel that my father's death would necessarily protect either of us from an unfair representation of him. As Couser writes:

I would argue that it entails maximum vulnerability to posthumous misrepresentation because it precludes self-defence. Thus, we trust that after we die our corpse will be treated with respect, that our 'will' will be honored, and that secrets we may have divulged will be respected, either by being kept or by being communicated only to certain parties or in certain ways. In this regard, death may be the state of ultimate vulnerability and dependency (Couser 2004, p.16.).

There are no hard and fast rules about memoir writing. As we have seen from the historical discussion in Chapter 2, the range, style, motivation and adherence – or lack thereof – to an ethical framework varies from one writer to another. As Couser also points out: "Life writing is far too complex and variable to be subjected to a set of abstract, unvarying, and presumably universal principles" (Couser 2004, p. 33).

So what I did was write everything – uncensored – before addressing the ethical issues raised above. I wrote – as it were – as if no one was watching, without applying the ethical breaks to myself before it was necessary. I decided I would write about my father's life, the struggles he endured as a young boy, his forced departure from Germany on the eve of World War II, and then his spectacular rise through the publishing world from the late 1950s through to the early 1990s. I would also write about my own struggles with him and my need to prove myself in his eyes and my own eyes, as well as the eyes of those who might judge

me negatively because of my privileges. I would explore – as best I could – the depths of my relationship to my own “towering figure” and see where that took me. Because as I suspected – and as I was proven right – the act of writing about my father and myself would naturally lead me towards writing about others close to me, particularly my mother and my wife with whom I’d just separated, and our children.

And, of course, while the tensions in writing a conventional biography of my father were considerable – and eventually abandoned for reasons already explained – I was actually multiplying these tensions by deciding to write about other key figures in my life.

The scholarship surrounding my moral and ethical challenges is voluminous, given the extent to which memoir has become such a dominant part of our culture. What are our obligations to our subjects? Are we entitled to reveal information about them if that information casts them in an unflattering light? Do we have a right to hold up to the light conversations that were predicated on the assumption of privacy? Did our subjects agree to having their confidences, failings, indiscretions placed on public display and if they did, did they exercise that agreement with absolute sovereignty and due consideration of its implications? Are they free to change their mind? If writers are thieves by nature, thieves of family stories, does that justify their use for say, self-therapy, professional advancement or both? And even if these stories are to pass the so-called public interest test, is their telling justified if they bring with them a measure of private anguish and/or embarrassment?

This is what ethics strives to grapple with – responsibility towards oneself versus the responsibility towards those with whom one is in relationship with. It is an attempt to weigh up, and possibly even deflect “attention from me-generation preoccupations to demands that we think about our obligations to others” (Parker 2004, p.63).

My own memoir – a hybrid of sorts that sits somewhere between biography and autobiography – began, as I stated earlier in this thesis, as an attempt to get my father to write his own book. It then transformed itself into a book written by me about my father, before evolving further into a book about me, my father, my mother, my ex-wife, my daughters, my heritage and my overlapping career with my father's. Long before it was any of these things, however, it was simply a relationship between a father and a son, and this begs another question – how true a measure can a book be, any book, of a lifelong relationship, and what risks pertain to trying to reduce such a relationship to words between dust jackets?

The story of my father is “inextricably part of (my) own” story and it poses the question as to whether writing about the “privileged communications” I have shared with my father necessarily constitutes “a form of trespass” (Montello 2006, p.46). A failure to consider this is a dereliction of ethical and moral duties because, as Eakin writes: “Our own lives never stand free of the lives of others, (and therefore) we are faced with our responsibility to those others whenever we write about ourselves. There is no escaping this responsibility” (Eakin 1999, p. 159) unless, of course, one resorts to the disguise of fiction. This was the option “magnificently chosen by Marcel Proust in the early twentieth century (whereby he) let autobiography simmer and develop under the heat of the imagination, and present the result fiction,” in his tour de force *Remembrance of Things Past* (Yagoda 2009, p. 111).

As mentioned above, to her credit, perhaps, Mills decided that she was unable to publish a memoir about her family – either her family of origin or her chosen family – because of the disloyalty that this would entail. This is why I initially stopped writing my memoir. I saw that my father's life-long interest in being recognised and lauded for what he'd achieved in his career could be seriously compromised by my wading into print about him, whether he was alive or not. Such was his sensitivity to anything that might be less than glowing praise. After deciding not to write his own memoir, he had agreed to be interviewed by me for a book that I was going to write about him. This caused me, as it did Freadman, to question whether I was a reliable witness to – and chronicler of – my father's

life. And the answer for a long time was, quite simply, that I was not worthy of his trust because my motives were less than pure. I had wanted him to write his own book because I had felt there was much in his illustrious career and remarkable life trajectory worth writing about. I felt that the depression that had swept over him after his retirement from Condé Nast could be partly ameliorated by engaging in the act of writing about his life, an act that would demand of him an inward gaze, rather than the outward gaze he'd become so accustomed to during his glittering career. I believed this would be a nourishing new repast for him which would not only provide sustenance for him, but inspiration for others.

His witnessing of the rise of Hitler, his ostracism as a Jewish boy inside Nazi Germany, his parents' separation and his father's flight from Germany eight months before his own; his arrival in New Zealand as a stranger in a strange land, and the inexorable transformation of himself into a man equipped to run the most prestigious magazine publishing company in the world ... all this was a story worth telling. The fact that he shrunk from such a task meant either that the task would be abandoned or it would need to be taken up by someone else. That someone else had obviously turned out to be me.

I have letters that I wrote my father when I was eleven years old – my father was to make copies of them – and in many of these you can see clearly the heart-felt, scribbled hand of a boy wanting, as Paul Auster wrote in *The Invention of Solitude* to “save” (his) own father from solitude” (Barbour 2004, p. 76). I took up the task of writing about my father as a means of saving him, in part, from his own solitude. Not only would the task inevitably involve many hours of companionable discussion between us, it would also perhaps sate his appetite for recognition.

This hunger to be known for what he'd achieved had become more conspicuous the older and more successful he'd become. He'd come to wear his status and power far more conspicuously than I would have preferred. His circles were impossibly charmed, his access to power and influence seemingly limitless; his

authority unchallenged by anyone except Si Newhouse, the billionaire owner of Condé Nast. These circumstances, aided and abetted by his own natural Germanic formality and deeply Anglophilic sensibilities, made him often difficult to reach. He had spent a lifetime re-inventing himself, constructing an armour of pomp and certitude around himself, not to mention a wardrobe of Saville Row suits, that it was the brave or foolhardy person that attempted to storm this citadel.

"You do not stop hungering for your father's love even after you are grown up" writes Barbour (2004, p.75) and it is the case here that I have loved my father and craved his time and attention all my life, not just as a young boy. The fact that I saw in my father qualities I would have preferred not exist created huge conflict within me when it came to writing about him. If this task was to fall to me – and it seemed it had – how was I to balance journalistic fealty to the truth with the primary – and primal – fealty of a son to his father?

Furthermore, I had spent a lifetime endeavouring to remove myself from my father's shadow, not because I didn't love or respect him, but because, like any child of a successful parent, I desperately wanted to make my own mark in the world. Why would I give up years of my life to inhabit my father's life? The way I answered this ethically was to abandon the project for a number of years because, like Freedman: "I knew that writing the book would hurt" (and so) I shied away from that. It was much easier to shelve it and to go on with less threatening ... work" (Freedman 2004, p.121).

That less threatening work involved, as it has done my entire career, writing about other people, people I didn't know, people with whom there was nothing to lose if the going got tough. With my father there was a lot to lose and yet there was an impulse – unconscious at first – to engage. Couser writes: "As we enter late middle age and contemplate our own mortality, we are inclined to review and narrate the lives of our parents – especially those of our fathers" (Couser 2011 p. 891). Couser's research led him to conclude that "when adult children choose to narrate the life of a parent, they usually choose the parent who is less

present – physically, geographically, and/or emotionally” (*ibid*). This was the case with me and the appeal of such a “patriography” held a similar appeal to that of Couser, in that it was “a way to memorialize (the parent)” who gave me life (Couser’s “gift”) and perhaps resolving “the always unfinished business that children have with their parents” (Couser 2012, pp. 179-180).

The challenge, of course, was to write it in such a way that would cause no harm, when he was alive or posthumously, and so, finding myself caught between Mills’ dictum of not crossing the line into betrayal and Freadman’s (initial) shying away from the task, I derived considerable comfort in Barbour’s approach of non-judgement. I would like to think it was my own natural impulse, but one that he was able to affirm in me. He writes: “It becomes harder to judge when one realises how various influences shaped a parent’s life – including the fact that the parent, too, was once a child reacting to family pressures (Barbour 2004, p.73). He continues: “Good judgement sometimes resembles not judging” (Barbour 2004, p.91).

The trauma of my father’s childhood in Nazi Germany; the dark ascendance of Brown Shirts and Stormtroopers across the country; the separation of his parents in the same year Hitler came to power; his ostracism at school; his humiliation at the hands of Nazi thugs; his flight from Germany; his aching loneliness; his determination to reinvent himself and view the world with optimism; his need to bury the past in order to look forward; ... all these factors were to greatly influence any propensity I might have had to judge him harshly. Barbour writes: “If ‘tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner’ (to fully understand another person is to forgive) the autobiographer may find that the project of life writing makes it difficult to judge” (Barbour 2004, p.73). And as Freadman writes, my father’s “sense of the world” had been “decisively shaped by the Holocaust” and he had no real desire “to probe the dark psychological places” – the ‘desert places’” as Robert Frost referred to them (in Freadman 2004, p. 123). My father was afraid, I think, of that interior country, but, as with Freadman, I believe his later years would have “been more satisfying, less disappointing to him had he been less guarded, better able to reveal and pursue his inner needs”

(Freadman 2004, p.133). His failure to do so, coupled – paradoxically enough – with his desire for recognition led me to a similar endeavour to that of Freadman: the writing of a memoir that might spare my father “the indignity of oblivion” (Freadman 2004, p. 140). In so doing I have partly replicated Freadman’s efforts by writing a hybrid of biography and autobiography. Freadman writes:

It’s about my father’s life, but also my relationship with him, and about what it has meant to be the son of such a man. I think of is an example of what I term the subgenre of the Son’s Book of the Father (Freadman 2004, p.122).

As Eakin points out, Freadman subjects “his motives to a rigorous analysis in an exercise of ‘imaginative modelling’ ” (Eakin 2004, p.10). He did this by “bringing his father back to life in order to hash out with him the propriety of writing the memoir” (*ibid*) and, in doing so, interrogating the concept of trust which he hoped he had not betrayed. Freadman needed reassurance that his memoir had “been loyal not only to his father’s trust in him but also to his own trust in his ‘best self’” (*ibid*). In this way, Freadman’s representation of his father raised the fundamental question posed by Taylor and Parker: ‘What is it good to be?’ (*ibid*).

On September 24, 2012, I subjected myself to a similar interrogation, but in my case, I did so with my father and mother alive and sitting before me. It was prompted by my mother saying to me suddenly at the breakfast table: “What is your book about? Everybody keeps asking me if there’s going to be a book about your father. Someone has to write about the people he’s met and influenced. Are you putting this in your book?”

Both my parents were staring at me, waiting for my answer.

“You have to remember,” I said, “this book started out as me trying to get Dad to write his own book.”

“Yes he was too lazy to do it,” my mother said.

“Not lazy,” my father replied. “Reluctant” (author conversation, September 24, 2012).

My father looked utterly bewildered and lost. His body was slumped at the table, his head bowed toward the floor. With his sight gone in one eye, his hearing seriously impaired and his ability to walk almost non-existent, he cut a forlorn and disconsolate figure. This was the moment I had been both hoping for and hoping to avoid. It was the opportunity to share with them both some of what I'd written, not just about my father's life but also my mother's.

I happened to have my computer with me so I read excerpts from my memoir for nearly forty minutes, including passages I had been worrying about for years – my father's hauteur, his spit and polish, his ability to decimate with words and my desire to challenge his certitude and power through an equivalent marshalling of language and ideas. I read on about his life in Germany, the sadness of his childhood, his attempts to conceal his German origins after he'd fled the country, his re-casting himself and his speech patterns along Churchillian lines, his achievements and the concomitant stress he seemed to have carried most of his life. I had been reluctant to include a passage in my book about his morning convulsions, the daily ritual of his dry retching in the toilet before work, and my being woken by these frightful noises each morning. I read this to him, and on and on I ploughed, including sections about my mother and her parents and the musical heritage that was bequeathed to her, and subsequently to me and my elder daughter, Jordan.

"It's wonderful," my mother said when I stopped. "It's just wonderful. I can see it all. The images are beautiful."

"Do you understand now what I'm trying to do?" I asked them both.

"Yes," my mother said.

My father was silent, his head down around his chest. He looked up and his eyes were glistening.

"But what's the doctorate about?" my mother continued (*ibid*).

I explained to her that I was not only writing a memoir, I was also writing an academic paper (I failed to call it an exegesis) that would deal in part with the ethics of life writing. I talked to them both about how deeply the issues of trust and potential betrayal had weighed on my mind, and whether this was my story

or all our stories, and whether, in fact, I had a right to write the story even if I decided it were mine to tell.

"Well you might have to show it to us, mightn't you?" my mother said.

"Yes, probably I will," I replied.

"And what will you do if Dad doesn't like some of what you've written?" (ibid).

Here was the central question raising its glowering head above the parapet. Did my father trust me to write things the way I saw them? And if he disagreed, would he, as both father and life-long publisher, grant me the freedom to do so anyway?

"It's a curious thing," I told them, "because all my life Dad has upheld the separation between church and state in publishing, the requirement that management never interferes with the decisions made on the editorial floor. Dad never told Tina (Brown) or Harry (Evans) what to do and I would imagine that this editorial freedom would extend to me when writing about him."

I looked at my father. He nodded in silent agreement (ibid).

The following day when I returned home, there was a message from him on my answering machine:

*Hi Dave, I thought you might have arrived by now. Listen, what you read to us was absolutely terrific, very moving and beautifully written and very positive and complimentary about me and my life. You really said it all ... and better than an autobiography. It's better coming from you than for me to write it myself, or with somebody who doesn't know me the way you do. I was very touched ... It was lovely to have you here. I hope you're well and had a good trip and lots of love. Goodbye darling* (author conversation, September 25, 2012.)

What father says "lots of love" and "goodbye darling?" What father places such trust in his son? Only a man with soft hands, a tender disposition and a fierce commitment to freedom of expression; a man for whom all the protective coating of power and status has been as nothing compared to the true, quiet conversings

of his heart? This was the man I loved and whose love and respect I had hankered for all my life.

"If you say that everyone has a core story to tell, a story that lies at the heart of all the stories they're capable of telling, then maybe my relationship with you is my core story," Freadman tells his father in their imaginary conversation eight years after his father's death (2004, p.140). Once again, my experiences coincide with Freadman. He writes "...so deep was (my father's) desire to see me have a good life that, in principle at least, he'd (want) to concede my right to write – and publish – if I felt that this would help bring the desired good life about (Freadman 2004, p.128). This, too, was my core story, the one that has formed the backdrop to my memoir, and the one I have tried to write in all good "filial conscience" (Gooblar 2008, p.40). And at the time, in light of my father's failing health, alongside his imprimatur, I have also tried to weigh up who it is who has given his blessing to this project, because, again as Freadman writes:

...there are at least two trusting fathers present here: the one who could have made astute trust choices but didn't need to because he was still largely in command of his own life; and the man who was no longer in command of his own life and therefore needed to make trust choices but wasn't in good enough condition to do so (Freadman 2004, p.144).

And so it was that on at least three more occasions my father returned to two passages in my manuscript that he was unhappy with. As he said to me a week after our September 24/25 exchange:

"Dave I'm not happy with you referring to my being sick in the bathroom before I went to work. What happens in a man's bathroom should stay in a man's bathroom and I would like you to please take this out of the book."

"Dad," I replied. This passage is absolutely essential to my book."

"Why?"

"Because it is a hinge point in the story. It shows how I imbibed the stress that you were carrying with you to work, and how this affected me."

"But it was my tension not yours. And it's a private matter."

"But Dad, I'm your son and it affected me too. In fact it set up in me a lifelong equating of stress with success. You couldn't have one without the other. You couldn't run *Vogue* magazine without throwing up every morning, just like you couldn't be a successful journalist without living and breathing and sometimes vomiting that stress out of yourself."

"Well I'd like you to think about taking it out please. I'm not going to insist but I'd feel better if it were not there."

"Okay Dad but I'd also like you to think about allowing me the right to write it, to understand and respect that this is a little boy talking about the convulsions his father had every morning and what this did to him. Because in a sense this happened to me as much as it did to you."

"Alright," he said, "I'll think about it" (author conversation, October 1, 2012).

The other thing I pointed out to him was that this episode gave him a humanity and vulnerability that was crucial to an understanding of the kind of man he was. I was vulnerable all through the book, surely he could allow me the right to make him vulnerable at least once?

And again he said: "Alright, I'll think about it" (*ibid*).

This was my version of Herman Roth's command to his son, Philip, that he omit "the episode of the shit" (Eakin 1999, p. 185) – in my case vomit – out of respect for his father's right to privacy; as opposed to obeying his own experience in the service of "truth" or, perhaps more truthfully, a dramatic moment in the narrative.

My father eventually relented, possibly because he no longer had the strength to meet my own resistance and insistence. This, of course, went to the heart of Freadman's question about being a "decent" recipient of one's father's trust – a question that I will continue to ask myself, probably for the rest of my life. (Freadman 2004, p.133). Was I trampling on my father's privacy – at the weakest moment in his life – in order to fulfil my needs for dramatic content as a writer?

Like Freadman's father, my father did not want "aspects of his troubled inner life set on the public record" (Freadman 2004, p. 123), and so, as with Freadman, I "had to weigh his needs and rights against my own" (*ibid*). And in the end my needs and rights prevailed, but with this crucial caveat. I obtained his permission.

As I write:

I remember at the age of four or five hearing a calamitous sound coming from the bathroom, strangling the morning stillness with its desperate, primal fury. It was my father dry-retching over the basin – AAAREGHCHU, AAREGHCHU – the noise reverberating through the bathroom wall into my bedroom.

Some people wake to Mozart or pneumatic drills or the gossip and tweeting of birds. I used to wake to the sound of my father heaving from stress. For up to ten minutes I would listen to these convulsions, until suddenly the noise would stop and I would get up, slightly shaken, bathed in my own sweat.

'Are you okay, Daddy?'

'Sure,' he would reply, in tones so reassuring I found myself wondering if I'd actually imagined it all.

Most mornings were like this – his loud disturbances, my anxious inquiries and the gentle assurances that all was well with the world. That's when I started to equate success with tension. It seemed to me you couldn't have one without the other. You couldn't possibly rise to the top of your profession – in his case magazine publishing – unless you were having a bilious attack each morning (Leser 2014, p. 23).

There were a few other references in the book that my father was also unhappy with – by this time he had read the manuscript twice – and they all related to my use of the word "fled" to describe his rushed departure from Nazi Germany on the eve of World War II.

"I never fled Germany," he told me. "My father managed to get us visas and we flew out of Berlin for London in April 1939. It was quite orderly."

"Yes Dad but you were only 14 so I would argue that your knowledge of this is, at best, scant. Ernie would not have shared with you the dramas she must have gone through in order to get you out of Germany. She would have spared you that."

"Perhaps," my father replied. But we didn't flee."

"Dad you flew and you also fled. You know from history what had started happening to Jews all across Germany from 1935 onwards. This was four years later on the eve of World War II. Yes you had visas, but you had limited time to get out otherwise you would never have survived. And Ernie would have carried the knowledge and the burden of this, not you as a 14 year old. She must have kept it from you in order for you to stay calm" (author conversation, October 6, 2012).

Back and forth we went on the semantics and import of the word 'fled' and once again my father acknowledged my rights to call it as I saw it. He was not happy about it because he always regarded his departure from Germany as one free from the wrenching anxieties so many other Jews experienced when trying to escape but the publisher in him bowed to the journalist in me.

As discussed, my father was far from the only ethical challenge I was forced to confront in writing this memoir. There was also the question of my mother, which had only partially been answered by our breakfast dialogue and her enthusiastic responses to my readings (author conversation, September 24, 2012). Why was it that my father loomed so much larger in my writings than her? Why was she more silhouetted, confined to the margins of the pages, than my father, and what did this say about me?

My mother's response to my manuscript ended up being almost totally positive, except for one central observation about my description of her refrigerator. In the manuscript I had written on p. 273:

"In my family kitchen fridge meats, chickens and cheeses would sit in shelves for weeks at a time, squeezed behind the gherkins, eggs, sour creams, bags of salmon patties and wilting lettuce, slowly turning rotten and shrivelled. My mother's storage system was like a freshly abandoned village in the heat of battle, cow pens smoking, chicken runs overflowing, dairy bails groaning under the pressure of bursting udders."

"Dave you can't possibly say that about my fridge," she told me one morning on the phone.

"But Mum it's true," I said. "And besides which it's meant as humour."

"Well I don't find it funny," she replied."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not. It's embarrassing. And it doesn't always look like – what did you say – a smoking cow pen? Besides which, it's a Jewish mother's fridge and you've forgotten to mention the gefilte fish and herrings."

"Okay Mum, what if I add the gefilte fish and herrings and say that it often looked like a smoking cow pen, rather than implied it *always* looked like a smoking cow pen. Would that be okay?"

"Yes I suppose so," she said (author conversation, October 8, 2012).

And so that was how I overcame my mother's objections. I added gefilte fish and herrings to the smoking cow pen while saying "it often looked" like that rather than intimating that it *always* looked like that:

In my mother's fridge, meats, chickens and cheeses would sit on the shelves for weeks at a time, squeezed behind the gherkins, gefilte fish, herrings, eggs, sour cream, bags of salmon patties and wilting lettuce, slowly turning rotten. My mother's storage system often looked like a freshly abandoned village in the heat of battle – cow pens smoking, chicken runs overflowing, dairy bails groaning under the pressure of bursting udders (Leser 2014, p. 240).

My daughters, Jordan and Hannah, chose not to read the manuscript before publication. Both trusted me to write about them in any way I chose. My sister

came back to me with comments mainly about our early years together – fragments I'd forgotten of our early life in London before we moved to Australia in 1959. My brother simply informed me that he didn't like the way I'd described his demeanour at family dinners. In an early draft (p. 34) I had written:

"And he (my father) argued about all these things with such strength of conviction you needed good ideas and choice words to match him, otherwise you'd be ground to dust. I'm sure that's why my sister developed such a life-long antipathy to political discussions and why my brother sometimes looked like he was sitting in a puddle of piss around the family dinner table."

I changed this to:

When I was younger it was always my father who dominated the room. I'm sure that's why my sister, Deborah, developed such a lifelong antipathy to political and business discussions and why my brother Daniel often felt awkward at the dinner table (Leser 2014, p.46).

That was almost the sum total of my brother's input, partly because – and this is only an educated guess – he never actually read the book properly, and certainly not in its final published form. The reason for this was that I don't think he was ever happy about me writing about our father and my life in the first place. But this is supposition not fact.

What is fact is that my former wife, Merran, had quite a few things to say about the manuscript that I posted her in June 2013. My book had ended up exploring in some detail the unhappy passage from what had been mostly a good marriage to one that had well and truly foundered on the rocks of discontent and estrangement in late 2009/early 2010. I tried to be as scrupulously fair as possible, going so far as to shoulder the lion's share of the blame for what had happened to our relationship. Nonetheless I was full of trepidation for how she would respond to my version of events, particularly given that there were other unrelated events overwhelming us at the time, namely the impending death from ovarian cancer of Georgia Enter, our daughter Hannah's closest friend.

Merran's response to the manuscript came in August 2013 via email. Nine pages had been photographed with notes in the margin, some of them small points, others much more significant. On page 77 of the unedited manuscript I had written: "She (Merran) was a pyrotechnic as well. She would lay wires and load canisters on and off barges and choreograph firework shows." In her email Merran had crossed out "wires" and replaced that with "detonators", as well as inserted "mortars" instead of canisters. No problems there. Nor with the description of the outfit she'd worn at our wedding on March 31 1988. I'd described her as a "beauteous creature in white pants and a body-hugging taffeta top", whereas the reality was the pants were "raw-silk damask" and the top was no top all; it was "a body-hugging taffeta dress split to the waist" (Leser 2014, p.135).

Then things got more complicated. I could have sworn that when I'd asked Merran to marry me on a hotel balcony in the Negev Desert in the northern autumn of 1987 I had gone down on bended knee. "You didn't," she replied. "I would have remembered. I was sitting across your lap the whole time" (Author correspondence, August 2, 2013). When I wrote on page 67 of that, prior to marrying me, Merran had a few years earlier married a gay friend of hers in Canada because "she was ambitious enough to suspend whatever traditional impulses she had about the marriage institution so as to further her career goals". That, too, was off the mark. "THAT IS SO WRONG," she wrote in the left margin (*ibid*). And then in the right margin: "No David, the work was over. I just loved and wanted to live in Canada". On page 71 of the manuscript I re-created a domestic argument in my Jerusalem apartment in 1987 to show how the demarcation lines had been drawn early in our marriage, particularly in relation to the division of labour at home. I had been on a story deadline for the *South China Morning Post* and Merran was staying with me.

"What shall we do for dinner tonight?" Merran had asked me.

"I was just going to do something easy," I replied. "Get a couple of schnitzels from the supermarket, heat them up, a bit of salad, something like that (*ibid*) ...

"We haven't prepared a meal together since I got here," she said.

"I know because I've been working ..."

"Well don't you think we could be a bit more creative?"

"I'm trying to be creative," I said, "and get this story done. Why don't you cook something, seeing as I'm working and you're not?"

"I'm sorry," she said ... and this was crossed out and replaced by "Because I think we should share these tasks" (Leser 2014, p.238).

I'd actually written her response as, "Because I'm not your chattel," but this, too, was crossed out.

As was my recounting of the dreadful moment when we informed Hannah in late 2009 that her parents were separating. This was what I wrote on page 165 of the manuscript: "Darling we have some bad news," her mother began. "Dad has decided to move out." There was a line through this and the two paragraphs below. According to Merran, I was the one who had delivered Hannah the news, not her – which is why in the published version it reads: "Darling, we have some bad news," I began. "I have decided to move out ..." (Leser 2014, p.269).

Every change that Merran asked for I agreed to. I did this because firstly, memory is an unfaithful ally and I might have been wrong in my recollections. Or as "Rousseau ... recognised, and as a century of psychological research has confirmed, the human memory is very far from a completely trustworthy mechanism" (Yagoda 2009, pp. 102-103). But secondly – and more importantly – I didn't want anything to sabotage the publication of my book; so if it took acquiescing to Merran's wishes to ensure she would not contest the book then I was prepared to do so.

There were two other people I needed to check my recollections with and the first was a former lover whom I'd met on a visit to Israel in 1982 and with whom I'd remained friends ever since. Talya was now living in Paris and I sent her the draft passage that pertained to our meeting. It read as follows:

Talya had arrived in Israel from America as a 16 year old following a family tragedy on a lake near Philadelphia. She and her twin brother had been sailing when their boat had capsized and her brother had failed to

surface. Talya had returned home alone, to tell her horror-stricken parents of what had happened.

Talya was fluent in four languages and knew the length and breadth of Israel. She was passionate, smart and forthright, and had strikingly beautiful lapis lazuli eyes. One evening she invited me to her Jerusalem apartment for dinner after a tour of the Judean Desert and Dead Sea. I was meant to leave that evening, but after a dinner of couscous and red wine from the slopes of Mount Carmel she asked me to stay the night. I stayed for the next three months.

We became life-long friends, despite our sometimes conflicting views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Like my grandmother and parents and many of the Jews I knew, she believed I'd been hopelessly compromised by my university lecturer and my left-leaning friends in Australia.

We would smoke Marlboro lights on her verandah overlooking the rooftops of West Jerusalem, and talked deep into the night about the Jews who had turned the desert into a modern-day Garden of Eden, who had extended the hand of peace to the Arabs many times over, who had, in 1948 when the Jewish state was being created, tried to persuade the fleeing Arabs to stay in the face of hysterical cries from the Arab capitals for them to flee.

Under a blue-black sky, with the smell of Jerusalem pines all around us, we would dive down into the underworld of the Jewish experience – the early anti-Semitism of Christianity, the blood libels of centuries, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the expulsions, the ghettos, the pogroms, the death camps, the mass killings – and then after all this, the Great Return to where we now sat, inside this ancient city of holy contest, with still no peace. Still rejected. Still beleaguered. Still misunderstood.

I would listen to her and offer my own still-forming rebuttals on behalf of the Palestinians, half believing what I was saying, half enjoying the devil's

advocacy, and our arguments would fuel the other until, in the early hours of the morning, we would fall into bed and make love and I would sleep with my own small army of angels until awakened by her screaming and flailing arms as she tried to rescue her drowning brother from the lake (Leser 2014, p. 69)

She called me from Paris in 2013 to give me some startling news. What I had written about her brother drowning in the lake was wrong. She had made it up. It had never happened. She had concocted the story to deal with a different unnamed tragedy and for thirty years had allowed me to believe this false story.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, flummoxed.

"Because I couldn't," she replied.

"So what did happen to your brother?" I asked.

"I can't tell you now but I will next time you're in Paris. In the meantime I beg you not to write this."

"So what should I write instead?

"I will send you the changes if that's okay. I'm so sorry and so embarrassed. I hope you will forgive me" (author conversation July 23, 2014.)

How could I not forgive her? She was one of my oldest friends and she was desperately ill with cancer.

"Of course I forgive you," I replied. "Just send me through the changes that you can live with" (*ibid*).

A week later I received the following email from her:

David sweetheart. Whew - I have to say I feel better – thank-you for your generosity, compassion and continuing love – that was not an easy conversation and I am so very grateful it went as it did. Here is what I have written – feel free to tweak it as you wish – can't really think of more

I would want to say... tell me what you think. All my love and kisses T"  
(Author correspondence, July 30, 2013).

In my original manuscript I had written: "Talya had arrived in Israel from America as a 16 year old following a family tragedy on a lake near Philadelphia. She and her twin brother had been sailing when their boat had capsized and [her] brother had failed to surface. Talya had returned home alone, to tell her horror-stricken parents of what had happened."

This is how she wanted it to read: "Talya had arrived in Israel, a sixteen-year-old confused and grieving American, seeking to turn a new page in the 'promised land'."

I sent her an email asking her whether I could tweak it thus. She agreed:

Talya had arrived in Israel as a sixteen-year-old, hoping to turn a new page in the Promised Land. Something had happened to her back in Philadelphia that had caused such grief and confusion that one day she'd simply decided to pack her bags and come to Israel. What that 'something' was she never told me (Leser 2014, p. 113).

Then there was the final paragraph which I had initially written as: "I would listen to Talya and offer my own still-forming rebuttals on behalf of the Palestinians, half believing what I was saying, half enjoying the devil's advocacy, and our arguments would fuel the other until, in the early hours of the morning, we would fall into bed and make love and I would sleep with my own small army of angels until awakened by Talya screaming and flailing arms as she tried to rescue her drowning brother from the lake."

She asked for it to be changed to ... "where I would sleep with my own small army of angels until awakened by Talya screaming and flailing arms as she battled with her own nocturnal demons" (Author correspondence July 30, 2013).

I tweaked that so that it finally read: I would sleep with my own small army of angels until awakened by Talya screaming and flailing arms as she did battle with the unnamed ghosts of her past (Leser 2014, p. 114).

On May 14, 2014, Talya's brother Daniel wrote me an email, announcing that his sister had died the previous evening. "She died with as much grace and dignity as she lived," he wrote me. "We were all there, holding her hands, letting her go. I am sorry to tell you this by email...thank you for the love and care you have for Talya" (author correspondence, May 14, 2014).

I had written about another female friend in an early draft of the book whom I'd first met in 1976 at Macquarie University. Instead of sending her the passage by email I read it to her in a phone conversation in early 2013. This is what I read:

I'd seen [her] walking across the campus lawn one day and, like every other young male student on the lawn, become utterly mesmerised by her. She was lithe and tawny and her long silky brown hair was flecked in gold, and her face ... well, her face was truly a work of art – all high cheekbones, dark brown eyes, full pink lips and this smile that would have melted the hellfires...

...We met soon after I saw her crossing that campus lawn, only to discover that we were both studying the same subjects – English literature, anthropology, psychology and philosophy. We would break early from lectures to go and sit on the lawn and talk about Robert Lowell, Margaret Mead and Sigmund Freud and what a cunt Kant was for being so obtuse, and how fucked Descartes was for splitting the mind from the body and treating the human as a machine.

At some point – perhaps midway through a recitation of Lowell's *To Speak of Woe That Is In Marriage* – I'd leant over and kissed her on the sloping lawn outside the library, and every part of me had trembled with the sheer delight of having met this wondrous honey-filled creature.

I would have done anything for [her], except that she was hopelessly entangled in a relationship with a young man who, according to [her], was

as incapable of talking about his feelings as I was apparently happy to do. But there was something about that man's incapacity that drew [her] in, some feeling in her that – like me – she wanted to shine a light into someone else's dark, brooding places.

And so my love, while consummated in rare, stolen moments on a beach or in her bedroom when her parents were away, ultimately went unrequited. I could never have her soul and body, although it's true that one day she came to my shared house at Balmoral Beach and lain in bed with me wearing only her black leather boots. If we could have stayed like that for years, being fed through trapdoors, I would have been the happiest young man in the world (author correspondence February 12, 2013).

I thought it was a rather good passage and I enjoyed reading it to [her] thirty-seven years after the event. She enjoyed it too but not enough to have me to keep it in the book. She asked that I take it out, not because it wasn't true but perhaps because it was all too true. Once again I complied. There was no mention of [her] in my published memoir.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

In order to write my memoir I had to navigate my way through a quagmire of ethical questions, particularly with respect to family and friends. It was not good enough to simply assert – to myself or others – that it was my life, my story, my right, therefore, to say whatever I wanted in my book. Every healthy relationship is built on mutual confidence and to claim otherwise – by asserting the prerogative of the writers – is to ignore, and often imperil, those relationships. “If our intimate relationships are akin to the confessional” writes Montello “we share our lives with each other in trust” (Montello 2006, p.46). By confessing ourselves, Eakin says, we: “...inevitably confess those who have shared our life” (Eakin in Montello 2006, p. 46). He writes earlier: “Life writers are criticised not only for not telling the truth – personal and historical – but also for telling too much truth” (Eakin, 2004, p.3).

The publishing world, as we know, is awash with life writing, a trend which Maureen Dowd has poured scorn on for its washing of “dirty laundry in public” (Dowd in Eakin, *ibid*). William Gass, too, has derided autobiography for “its descent into an infantilized narcissism” (Gass in Eakin, *ibid*). Eakin provides a less censorious perspective:

Clearly life – and life writing – in the information age has meant the transmission of more and more personal information, often quite intimate, with less and less restraint. People may protest the loss of their privacy, but with an assist from computers and cell phones in these wired and wireless times, they are conducting much of their private lives in public places; as see-all, tell-all Web sites proliferate, a lot of people log on and look (Eakin 2004, pp.3-4).

The challenge, of course, was to write a memoir worth reading, but one that honoured the mutual confidences that had been built throughout a lifetime. As

Yagoda highlights, the nation of memoir has exploded into a glittering – and sometimes stultifying – universe since the time of St Augustine's *Confessions* in the fifth century. Yagoda guides us through the history of memoir, tracing its family tree up to the present day and its profusion (Yagoda 2009, p. 14). How to judge such endeavours? Perhaps as the *New York Times* suggests: "(By the way) we judge anyone else: by the quality of their insights; by their tone; by whether they lie for advantage or profit, or offer their stories in good faith" (Shulevitz 2009).

I spent years grappling with my own good faith, investigating my motives in as ruthless a fashion as possible, in order to adhere to this maxim. I stopped and re-started the book more times than I care to recall, most often because of the risks of causing pain and injury. I then resumed the task with certain gusto – confident in my reasons for doing so. I believed not that, as Eakin writes: "I am someone with a story to tell ... someone who has lived a valuable life" (Eakin 2004, p.5) but rather because as a journalist accustomed to writing about others, I had a story worth telling and that, if told well, more than worth telling. The motivation was always crucial and through my own grappling with this my motivations became clearer. A writer needs to write in order to understand better. In order to understand better he needs to wrestle with the paradoxes of the human condition. Where better to start or finish than within one's own family? In the dynamics between a father and son; between a father and his daughters; between a husband and wife. The person is always the universal if told well and if he can "pay tribute" (Goolbar 2008, p.39) in the process to those who have mattered, so much the better. As Freadman writes:

I'd like to think that in putting many facets of my father on record ... I have brought a fine man back to life for the contemplation of others ... (In doing so) I hope I haven't subjected a profoundly decent man to unreasonable narrative indecency. I hope I have done the right thing in publishing this auto/biography. I think I probably have (Freadman 2004, pp.144-5).

I believe I did the right thing in publishing my memoir. It was my story to tell, but not in isolation from those who I loved. They, too, had a crucial stake in what went on to the public record and in my seeking their approval before publication I believe I satisfied the ethical requirements of a project like this. On July 4, 2014 my memoir, *To Begin To Know: Walking in the Shadows of My Father* was launched at Bondi Icebergs with my father present. “Dad, we’re just so happy that you’re here today,” I told the assembled guests, “to witness the official birth of this nearly still-born book” (Leser to audience July 4, 2014 Bondi). I then laid out to the audience the ethical issues I had faced in writing the book.

How do you balance a journalist’s commitment to the truth, or the truth as we see it, with the primal and primary fealty of a son to his father? What are our obligations to our fathers who are also our subjects? Do we have a right to hold up to the light conversations that were predicated on the assumption of privacy? Do these stories pass the so-called public interest test and, even if they do, is the telling of these stories justified if they bring any measure of anguish or embarrassment? All this was part of my quandary. As was eventually deciding what to write, if anything, about our mother Barbara, my sister Deborah, my brother Daniel and, of course, Merran, Jordan and Hannah too. Whose story was this and if it was my story did I have the right to tell it? And why the hell was I telling it anyway? (ibid).

I answered my own questions by elucidating on the nature of the book – of how it was a story of my father’s life and a son’s relationship with his father, but also a story of war, peace, love, marriage and identity, one which attempted to chart a course through some of the great episodes of the twentieth century and with its themes common to all humanity.

I thanked Merran “for the enormous grace” she had shown in “allowing me to ... wade into print on aspects of our mostly beautiful 23 year marriage” (ibid); and I thanked our daughters Jordan and Hannah for having faith enough in my judgement not to have proof-read the book prior to publication. Most importantly I then thanked my father for “trusting me enough to write this book

and for not just trusting me, but for standing firm in his publisher's belief that a journalist should call it as he sees it, even if this caused discomfort to those he was writing about" (*ibid*).

My father then chose to speak from his wheelchair in what would prove to be his second last public outing and his last public utterance. He said:

I'm here with mixed feelings. First and foremost with pride and love and sheer joy that you (David) told the story the way you saw it and that despite moments of hesitation, many moments of hesitation, I did not endeavour to exercise the option – if I had it, but I really didn't have it – of playing editor or publisher or writer. You've told the story your way and that's the way it ought to have been told ... Your sensitivity shines through this book ... I salute you. I'm immensely proud of you but more importantly I love you deeply as my son, as well as my friend. I hope the book will be an enormous success for the publishers and for you (Bernard Leser, July 4, 2014 Bondi).

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