

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2008 MAN BOOKER PRIZE



A Fraction of the Whole

a novel

Steve
Toltz

'Funny,
heartbreaking, brilliant'

Guardian

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The Times

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debut of a great comic talent'

Sunday Times



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

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

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

'Your mattress. I need,' he said.

'What for?' I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

I said that I was.

‘Step aside.’

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

‘Coming?’ the shorter prisoner asked me.

‘What for?’

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

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

‘I’ll pass.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was a typical lesson:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded. I got it. Dad continued.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Are you related?'

'I don't think so.'

'Then piss off.'

That hurt.

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

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

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

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

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

'He was a bank robber.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Jesus. What happened to you?'

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

'Let's get you cleaned up.'

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

'Sometimes it turns black.'

'I want to see that.'

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

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

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

'Are you sure about that?'

Dad turned and snorted at the headlines.

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

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

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

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

'I don't get it.'

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

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

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

'What the hell are you talking about?'

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

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

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

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

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

'I have absolutely no idea.'

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

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

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

Deadlock

I've been asked the same question again and again. Everyone wants to know the same thing: What was Terry Dean like as a child? They expect tales of kiddy violence and corruption in the heart of an infant. They imagine a miniature criminal crawling around the playpen perpetrating acts of immorality between feedings. Ridiculous! Was Hitler goose-stepping all the way to his mother's breast? Okay, it's true, there were signs if you chose to read into them. At seven years old, when Terry was the cop in cops and robbers, he'd let you go if you greased his palm with a lolly. In games of hide-and-seek, he hid like a fugitive. But so what? It doesn't mean a predisposition to violence is printed on a man's DNA. Yes, people are always disappointed when I tell them that as far as I'm aware, Terry was a normal infant; he slept and cried and ate and shat and pissed and gradually discerned that he was a different entity from, say, the wall (that's your first lesson in life: you are not the wall). As a child he ran around screaming that high-pitched noise that children scream. He loved reaching for poisonous substances to put in his mouth (an infant's instinct for suicide is razor-sharp), and he had an uncanny ability to cry just as our parents were falling asleep. By all accounts, he was just another baby. *I* was the remarkable one, if only for my inabilities.

Before Terry arrived, our lives were dominated by illness. It amazes me now how little I knew about my own condition, and how little I wanted to know. The only thing that interested me were the symptoms (violent stomach pains, muscle aches, nausea, dizziness); the underlying causes seemed totally irrelevant. They had nothing to do with me. Encephalitis? Leukaemia? Immune deficiency? To this day I don't really know. By the time it occurred to me to get a straight answer, everyone who might have had one was long dead. I know the doctors *had* theories, but I also remember they couldn't make

up their minds. I can only recall certain phrases, such as ‘muscle abnormality’, ‘disorder of the nervous system’, and ‘euthanasia’, that made little impact on me at the time. I remember being jabbed with needles and force-fed pills the size and shape of swollen thumbs. I remember that when they took X-rays, the doctors ducked out of the way very quickly, as if they’d just set off a firework.

This all happened before Terry was born.

Then one day I took a turn for the worse. My breathing was short and laboured. Swallowing took a century; my throat was a wasteland, and I would have sold my soul for some saliva. My bladder and my bowels had minds of their own. A pasty-faced doctor visited me twice a day, speaking to my anxious mother at the foot of my bed, always as if I were in the other room. ‘We could take him to hospital,’ he’d say. ‘But really, what’s the point? He’s better off here.’

It was then I began to wonder if I would die and if they would bury me in the new town’s new cemetery. They were still clearing the trees when I was at death’s door. I wondered: Would it be finished in time? If I carked it before it was ready, they’d have to ship my body off to a cemetery in some distant town I had never lived in, whose populace would walk past my grave without thinking, ‘I remember him.’ Unbearable! So I thought maybe if I held off death for a couple of weeks, maybe if I got the timing right, I could be the first body to transform the empty field into a functional cemetery, the inaugural corpse. Then I wouldn’t be forgotten. Yes, I was making plans while lying in wait for death. I thought about all the worms and maggots in that field and how they were in for a treat. Don’t snack, you maggots! Human flesh is coming! Don’t ruin your dinner!

Lying in bed as the sun slid through the crack in the curtains, I thought about nothing else. I reached up and threw open the curtains. I called out to people walking past. What’s going on with that cemetery? How’s the progress? I was keeping tabs. And it was

good news. The trees were gone. Iron gates fastened onto blocks of stone were erected as the entrance to the cemetery. Granite tablets had been shipped from Sydney; all they needed was a name! The shovels were standing by. It was all go!

Then I heard some terrible news. My parents were talking in the kitchen. According to my father, the old woman who ran the local pub had had a massive stroke in the middle of the night. Not a little one, but *massive*! I dragged myself upright. What's this? Yes, my father said, she was barely hanging on. She wasn't just *at* death's door, she was pounding on it! Oh no! A catastrophe! It was going to be a race to the finish line! Who would be first? The old biddy was nearly eighty, so she'd been practising dying for a lot longer than me. She had nature on her side. I had nothing but luck to hold out for. I was too young to die of old age but too old for infant mortality. I was stuck in the middle, that terrible stretch of time where people can't help but breathe.

The next day, when my father stopped into my room to check on me, I asked how the old woman was travelling. 'Not good,' he said. 'She isn't expected to last the weekend.' I knew I had at least another week, maybe ten days in me. I hit the bed. I tore the sheets. He had to hold me down. 'What the hell's got into you?' he shouted. I let him in on it, explained that if I were to die, I wanted to be the first in the cemetery. He laughed right in my face, the bastard. He called my mother in. 'Guess what your son's been saying to me?' Then he told her. She gazed at me with infinite pity and sat on the edge of the bed and hugged me as if she were trying to stop me from falling. 'You won't die, honey. You won't.'

'He's pretty sick,' my father said.

'Shut up!'

'It's best to prepare for the worst.'

The next day my smug father told the men at his worksite what I'd said. They laughed too, the bastards. At night the men told their wives.

They also laughed, the bitches. They thought it was adorable. Don't children say the cutest things? Soon the whole town was laughing. Then they stopped laughing and started wondering. It was a good question, they decided: who *would* be the first? Shouldn't there be a ceremony to commemorate the inaugural corpse? Not just a regular funeral. A real show! A big turnout! Maybe a band? The first burial is a big moment for a town. A town that buries its own is a living town. Only dead towns export their dead.

Queries on the state of my health poured in from all directions. People came in droves to see the exhibit. 'How's he doing?' I heard them ask my mother. 'He's fine!' she said tensely. They pushed past her into my bedroom. They had to see for themselves. Dozens of faces passed through my bedroom, peering at me expectantly. They came to see me lying prostrate, motionless, dying. Regardless, they were all very chatty. When people think your days are numbered, they're really very nice to you. It's only when you're trying to get on in the world that they bring their claws out.

That was only the adults, of course; the kids of the town couldn't stand to be in the same room as me. That taught me something worth noting: the healthy and the sick are not peers, whatever else they might have in common.

Apparently everyone hassled the old woman too. I heard they crowded around her bed looking at their watches. I couldn't understand why they'd taken such an interest. Later I learned bets had been laid. The old woman was the favourite. I was the long shot. I ran at over a hundred to one. Hardly anyone bet on me. I guess no one, not even in a morbid game of Guess Who'll Die First, liked contemplating the death of a child. It just didn't sit well with anyone.

'He's dead! He's dead!' a voice shouted one afternoon. I checked my pulse. Still ticking. I pulled myself up and called through the window at old George Buckley, our nearest neighbour.

‘Who? Who’s dead?’

‘Frank Williams! He fell off the roof!’

Frank Williams. He lived four houses down on the same street. From my window I could see the whole town running to his house to look. I wanted to look too. I dragged myself out of bed and moved like a greasy slug along the floor of my bedroom, into the hallway, out the front door into dazzling sunlight. Keeping my pyjama pants on was an issue, but then it always is. Wiggling across the patchy grass lawn, I thought about Frank Williams, the late entry and surprise winner of our little contest. Father of four. Or was it five? All boys. He was always trying to teach his sons to ride a bike. When it wasn’t one son wobbling past my window with a hysterically tense grimace, it was another. I always hated the Williams boys for being slow learners. Now I felt sorry for them. No one should lose a parent through clumsiness. Their whole lives, those boys are going to have to say, ‘Yeah. My father fell off a roof. Lost his balance. What? What does it matter what he was doing up there?’ Poor kids. Clearing gutters is no reason for a man to die. There’s just no honour in it.

The curious horde crouching around the dead man took no notice of the sick little worm crawling toward them. I made it through the legs of Bruce Davies, the town butcher. He peered down just as I peered up. Our eyes locked. I thought someone should tell him to get far away from the lifeless carcass of our neighbour. I didn’t like the glint in that butcher’s eye.

I looked closer. Frank’s neck was broken. His head had rolled back in a pool of dark blood and hung limp across the shoulders. When a neck breaks, it really breaks. I looked closer still. His eyes were wide open but there was nothing behind them, just a stupefying cavern. I thought: That will be me soon. Nothingness will envelop me just as it has enveloped him. Because of the contest and my own part in it, I saw this death not just as a preview of my own, but as an echo.

Frank and I were in this together, chained to one another in some macabre marriage for all eternity – deadlock, I now call it, the affinity the living have with the dead. It's not for everyone. You either feel it or you don't. I did then and I do now. I feel it profoundly: this sacred, insidious bond. I feel they are waiting for me to join them in holy deadlock.

I rested my head on Frank's lap and closed my eyes and let the voices of the townspeople soothe me to sleep.

'Poor Frank,' someone said.

'He'd had a good innings.'

'What was he doing up on that roof?'

'He was forty-two.'

'Is that my ladder?'

'Forty-two is young. He didn't have a good innings. He had a shit innings.'

'I'm forty-four next week.'

'What are you doing?'

'Let go of that!'

'This is my ladder. I lent it to him last year, but when I asked about it he swore he'd returned it.'

'What about the boys?'

'Oh geez . . . the boys.'

'What's going to happen to them?'

'They'll be okay. They still have their mother.'

'But they won't have this ladder. It's mine.'

Then I fell asleep.

I awoke back in bed, sicker than ever. The doctor said that by crawling half a kilometre to see my first dead body, I had set my health back, as if it were a clock I had adjusted for daylight saving. After he left, my mother sat on the edge of my bed, her unstrung face an inch from mine, and she told me in an almost guilty voice that she was

pregnant. I was too weak to say congratulations, and I just lay there as she stroked my forehead, which I really liked and still do, although there's nothing soothing in stroking your own forehead.

Over the following months, as my condition gradually worsened, my pregnant mother sat down beside me and let me touch her belly, which was swelling horribly. Occasionally I felt the kick or perhaps head-butt of the foetus inside. Once, when she thought I was asleep, I heard her whisper, 'It's a shame you won't get to meet him.'

Then, just when I was at my weakest and death was licking her lips, something unexpected happened.

I didn't die.

But I didn't live either.

Quite by accident, I took the third option: I slipped into a coma. Bye-bye world, bye-bye consciousness, bye-bye light, too bad death, hello ether. It was a hell of a thing. I was hiding right in between death's open arms and life's folded ones. I was nowhere, absolutely nowhere at all. Honestly, you can't even get to limbo from a coma.

Coma

My coma was nothing like those I've read about since: I've heard of people who fell into a coma in the middle of telling a joke and forty-two years later woke up and told the punchline. For them, those decades of oblivion were an instant of nothingness, as if they had passed through one of Sagan's wormholes, time had curled around on itself, and they had flown through it in a sixteenth of a second.

Describing the thoughts, visions, and sensations I had inside that coma is near impossible. It wasn't the nothingness, because there was

quite a bit of somethingness (when you're in a coma, even anything is good), but I was too young to make sense of the experience. I can say, though, that I had as many dreams and visions as if I'd consumed a canyonful of peyote.

No, I won't try to describe the indescribable, only so much as to say there were sounds I heard that I could not have heard and things I saw that I could not have seen. What I'm about to say is going to sound insane – or, worse, mystical, and you know I'm not that way inclined – but here it is: if you look at the unconscious mind as a big barrel, in the normal run of things the lid is open and sights, sounds, experiences, bad vibes and sensations pour in during the waking hours, but when there aren't any waking hours, none at all, for months or even years, and the lid is sealed, it's possible that the restless mind, desperate for activity, might reach deep into the barrel, right down to the bottom of the unconscious, dredging up stores of things that were left there by previous generations. This is a Jungian explanation and I don't even know if I like Jung, but there's very little else out there on the shelves that could go any way to explain the things I saw that I could not have seen, to justify the things I heard that I could not have heard.

Let me try to put it another way. There is a short story by Borges called 'The Aleph'. In the story, the Aleph, hidden under the nineteenth step of a cellar staircase, is an ancient mysterious portal to every point in the universe – I'm not kidding, every single point – and if you look into it, you see, well, absolutely everything. I'm hypothesising that somewhere in the ancient parts of ourselves there could exist a similar porthole, resting quietly in a crack or a crevice or within the folds of the memory of your own birth, only the thing is, normally we never get to reach it or see it because the usual business of living piles mountains of crap on top of it. I'm not saying I believe this, I'm only giving you the best explanation I've come up with so far for the root

of the extraordinarily dizzying hodgepodge of sights and sounds that flashed and whirled before my mind's eye and ear. If the mind can have eyes, why not ears? You probably think there's no such thing as the mind's nose, either. Well, there is. And like Borges in his story, I can't accurately describe it because my visions were simultaneous, and language, being successive, means I have to record it that way. So use your imagination, Jasper, when I tell you one-gazillionth of what I saw:

I saw all the dawns come up too early and all the middays reminding you you'd better get a hurry on and all the dusks whisper 'I don't think you're going to make it' and all the shrugging midnights say 'Better luck tomorrow.' I saw all the hands that ever waved to a stranger thinking it was a friend. I saw all the eyes that ever winked to let someone know their insult was only a joke. I saw all the men wipe down toilet seats before urinating but never after. I saw all the lonely men stare at department store mannequins and think 'I'm attracted to a mannequin. This is getting sad.' I saw all the love triangles and a few love rectangles and one crazy love hexagon in the back room of a sweaty Parisian café. I saw all the condoms put on the wrong way. I saw all the ambulance drivers on their off hours caught in traffic wishing there was a dying man in the back seat. I saw all the charity-givers wink at heaven. I saw all the Buddhists bitten by spiders they wouldn't kill. I saw all the flies bang uselessly into the screen doors and all the fleas laughing as they rode in on pets. I saw all the broken dishes in all the Greek restaurants and all the Greeks thinking 'Culture's one thing, but this is getting expensive.' I saw all the lonely people scared by their own cats. I saw all the prams, and anyone who says all babies are cute didn't see the babies I saw. I saw all the funerals and all the acquaintances of the dead enjoying their afternoon off work. I saw all the astrology columns predicting that one-twelfth of the population of earth will be visited by a relative who wants to borrow money. I saw all

the forgeries of great paintings but no forgeries of great books. I saw all the signs forbidding entrance and exit but none forbidding arson or murder. I saw all the carpets with cigarette burns and all the kneecaps with carpet burns. I saw all the worms dissected by curious children and eminent scientists. I saw all the polar bears and the grizzly bears and the koala bears used to describe fat people you just want to cuddle. I saw all the ugly men hitting on all the happy women who made the mistake of smiling at them. I saw inside all the mouths and it's really disgusting in there. I saw all the bird's-eye views of all the birds who think humanity looks pretty active for a bunch of toilet heads . . .

What was I supposed to make of all this? I know that most people would have taken it as a divine vision. They might even have found God in there, jumping out at them like a holy jack-in-the-box. Not me. All I saw was man and all his insignificant sound and fury. What I saw shaped my perspective of the world, sure, but I don't think it was a supernatural gift. A girl once told me that in thinking this I was turning a blind eye to a message from God and I should be walking around filled with a spiritual welling in my soul. That sounds nice, but what can I do about it? I don't have it in me. If it was his intent to tell me something in all that visual noise, God picked the wrong guy. My inability to make a leap of faith is carved into my DNA. Sorry, Lord. I guess one man's burning bush is another man's spot fire.

Six months must have passed in that state. In the outside world I was bathed and fed through tubes; my bowels and bladder were emptied, my appendages massaged, and my body manipulated into whatever shape amused my caretakers.

Then a change occurred: the Aleph, if that's what it was, was unexpectedly and unceremoniously sucked back down into its hiding place and all the visions departed in an instant. Who knows what mechanism was behind the lifting of the lid to the barrel, but it opened a crack wide enough for a stream of sound to come flooding in;

my hearing returned and I was wide awake but still blind and mute and paralysed. But I could hear. And what I heard was the voice of a man I didn't recognise coming through loud and clear, and his words were powerful and old and terrifying:

Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark; let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day: Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes. Why died I not from the womb?

I might have been paralysed, but I could feel my internal organs tremble. The voice continued:

Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul. Which long for death but it cometh not: and dig for it more than for hid treasures; Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave? Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God has hedged in?

(I later discovered that the voice belonged to Patrick Ackerman, one of our town's councillors, and he was reading me the Bible, from beginning to end. As you well know, Jasper, I don't believe in fate or destiny, but I do find it interesting that the very moment my ears cleared and were primed for listening, these words were the first that greeted them.)

With the return of consciousness and hearing, instinctively I knew that soon would come vision, followed by the ability to touch myself. In short, life. I was on my way back.

But before I returned, there was still a long road to go, and that road was paved with voices. A real cavalcade – old seductive voices, young expressive voices, scratchy throat-cancerish voices – and the

voices were full of words and the words were telling stories. Only much later did I learn that the town had taken me on as a sort of community project. Some doctor had pronounced it necessary that I be spoken to, and with our new bush town dying of unemployment, all those semi-altruistic souls who didn't have anything to do with their days turned up in droves. The funny thing was, I asked some of them afterward and not one of them thought I was really listening. But I *was* listening. More than listening, I was absorbing. And more than absorbing, I was remembering. Because the peculiar detail of all this is, perhaps because of the sightless, paralyzed state I was imprisoned in, the books read to me when I was in that coma burned into my memory. This was my supernatural education: the words of those books read to me in my coma I can quote to you word for word.

As it became clear that I wasn't going to die any day soon and might be in this petrified state forever, the voices became fewer and fewer, until only one voice remained: my mother's. The rest of the town gave me up for a block of wood, but my mother kept on reading. My mother, a woman who had only several years earlier left her native land having never read an English book in her life, was now churning through them by the hundreds. And the unexpected consequence was, as she stocked up my mind with words, thoughts, ideas, and sensations, she did as much to her own. It was as though great big trucks filled with words drove up to our heads and dumped their contents directly into our brains. All that unbound imagination brightened and stretched our minds with incredible tales of heroic deeds, painful loves, romantic descriptions of remote lands, philosophies, myths, the histories of nations rising, falling, chafing, and tumbling into the sea, adventures of warriors and priests and farmers and monsters and conquerors and barmaids and Russians so neurotic you wanted to pull out your own teeth. It was a prodigious

jumble of legends my mother and I discovered simultaneously, and those writers and philosophers and storytellers and prophets became idols to us both.

Only much later, when my mother's sanity came under scrutiny, did it occur to me what might have happened to her lonely and frustrated head, reading aloud all those astonishing books to her motionless son. What did those words mean to her in the painful quiet of my bedroom with the product of her loins lying there like a leg of lamb? I imagine her mind aching with the pains of growth like a tortured body stretched on a rack. I imagine her dwelling on what she read. I imagine her smashing through the confines of her cemented ideas with all those brutal, beautiful truths. It must have been a slow and confounding torment. When I think of what she transformed into much later, what demented tragedy she had become by the end of her young life, I can envisage in my mother the agonising delight of the reader who hears for the first time all the ramblings of the soul, and recognises them as her own.

The Game

Shortly after my eighth birthday, I woke up. Just like that. Four years and four months after I slipped into a coma, I slipped out again. Not only could my eyes see, but I used the lids to blink. I opened my mouth and asked for cordial – I wanted to taste something sweet. Only people regaining consciousness in movies ask for water. In real life you think of cocktails with pineapple chunks and little umbrellas.

There were a lot of joyous faces in my bedroom the week I returned to the land of the living. People seemed genuinely pleased to see me, and they all said, 'Welcome back,' as if I'd been away on a long voyage and any moment I was going to pull out the presents. My mother

hugged me and covered my hands in wet kisses that I could now wipe on my pyjamas. Even my father was jubilant, no longer the unfortunate man with the freak-show stepson, the Amazing Sleeping Kid. But little four-year-old Terry: he was in hiding. My sudden rebirth was too much of a shock. My mother breathlessly called for him to come and meet his brother, but Terry was a no-show. I was still too tired and weak to be offended. Later, when everything went into the toilet, I was forced to consider what it must have been like for Terry's developing mind to grow up next to a corpse and then to be told, 'That creepy mummy over there is your brother.' It must have been spooky, especially at night when the moonlight hit my frozen face and my unmoving eyeballs fixed on the poor kid, as if they had solidified that way on purpose, just to stare.

On the third day after my resurrection, my father thundered in and said, 'Let's get you up and about.' He and my mother grabbed my arms and helped me out of bed. My legs were sad, dead things, so they dragged me around the room as if I were a drunk friend they were escorting out of a bar. Then my father got an idea. 'Hey! You've probably forgotten what you look like!' It was true. I had. A vague image of a little boy's face drifted somewhere in my mind, but I couldn't be sure if it was me or someone who had once hated me. With my bare feet trailing behind, my father dragged me into the bathroom to look at myself in a mirror. It was a crushing spectacle. Even ugly people know beauty when they don't see it.

Terry couldn't avoid me forever. It was about time we were properly introduced. Soon after everyone had lost interest in congratulating me on waking up, he came into the room and sat on his bed, bouncing rhythmically, hands pressed down on his knees as if to keep them from flying away.

I lay back in bed gazing at the ceiling and pulled the covers over me. I could hear my brother breathing. I could hear myself breathing too – so could anyone; the air whistled noisily through my throat. I felt awkward and ridiculous. I thought: He'll speak when he's ready. My eyelids weighed a ton, but I wouldn't allow them the satisfaction of closing. I was afraid the coma was waiting.

It took an hour for Terry to bridge the distance between us.

'You had a good sleep,' he said.

I nodded but couldn't think of anything to say. The sight of my brother was overpowering. I felt impossibly tender and wanted a hug, but decided it was better to remain aloof. More than anything, I just couldn't get over how unrelated we looked. I know we had different fathers, but it was as if our mother hadn't a single dominant gene in her whole body. While I had an oily yellow complexion, a pointed chin, brown hair, slightly protruding teeth, and ears pressed flat against my head like they were waiting for someone to pass, Terry had thick blond hair and blue eyes and a smile like a dental postcard and fair skin dotted with adorable orange freckles; his features had a perfect symmetry to them, like a child mannequin's.

'Do you want to see my hole?' he said suddenly. 'I dug a hole in the backyard.'

'Later on, mate. I'm a bit tired.'

'Go on,' my father said, scowling. He was standing at the door glaring at me. 'You need fresh air.'

'I can't now,' I said. 'I feel too weak.'

Disappointed, Terry slapped my atrophied leg and ran outside to play. I watched him from the window, a little ball of energy trampling on flower beds, a little streak of fire jumping in and out of the hole he'd dug. While I watched him, my father remained hovering at the bedroom door, with burning eyes and fatherly sneers.

Here's the thing: I had peered over the abyss, stared into the yellow eyes of death, and now that I was back in the land of the living, did I want sunshine? Did I want to kiss flowers? Did I want to run and play and shout, 'To be alive! To be alive!' Actually, no. I wanted to stay in bed. It's difficult to explain why. All I know is a powerful laziness seeped into me during my coma, a laziness that ran through my blood and solidified into my core.

It was only six weeks after my groggy reawakening when – even though the pain it caused me to walk was reshaping my body to resemble a eucalypt twisted by fire – my parents and doctors decided it was time for me to return to school. The boy who had slept through a sizable chunk of his childhood was expected to slip unnoticed into society. At first the children greeted me with curiosity: 'Did you dream?' 'Could you hear people talking to you?' 'Show us your bedsores! Show us your bedsores!' But the one thing a coma doesn't teach you is how to blend into your surroundings (unless everyone around you is sleeping). I had only a few days to work it out. Obviously, I failed miserably, because it wasn't two weeks later when the attacks started. The pushing, the beating, the intimidation, the insults, the jeers, the wedgies, the tongue poking, and, worst of all, the agonising silence: there were almost two hundred students at our school, and they gave me four hundred cold shoulders. It was the kind of cold that burned like fire.

I longed for school to be over so I could go to bed. I wanted to spend all my time there. I loved lying down, the reading lamp shining, just a sheet over me, the blankets bunched up at the bottom of the bed like fat rolls. My father was unemployed then (the prison was completed and had its grand opening while I was in the coma), and he burst into my room at all hours and screamed, 'GET OUT OF BED! CHRIST! IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY OUTSIDE!' His fury multiplied tenfold when directed at Terry, who would lie in bed too. You see,

it might be difficult for anyone to believe now, but somehow, juvenile invalid though I was, I still managed to be a hero to Terry. He adored me. He idolised me. When I lay all day in bed, Terry lay all day in bed. When I threw up, Terry plunged his fingers down his own throat. I'd be under the sheets curled up into a ball, shivering uncontrollably with fever, and Terry would be curled and shivering too. It was sweet.

My father was scared stiff for him, for his actual son, and he concentrated all his mental forces into predicting terrible futures, all because of me.

One day he had an idea, and for a parent, it wasn't a bad one. If your child has an unhealthy obsession, the only way to wean him off it is to replace it with a healthy one. The obsession my father chose to lure Terry away from wanting to be an invalid was as Australian as a funnel-web spider bite on the kneecap.

Sport.

It was Christmas. Terry was given a football. My father said to him, 'Well, let's you and me go throw the ball around, eh?' Terry didn't want to go because he knew I would stay inside. My father put his foot down and dragged him kicking and screaming out into the sunshine. I watched them through the window. Terry put on a fake limp. Whenever my father threw the ball, Terry hobbled miserably across the field to catch it.

'Now stop that limping!'

'I can't help it!'

'There's nothing wrong with your leg!'

'Yes there is!'

My father spat with revulsion and grumbled his way back into the house, plotting and scheming the way fathers do, out of love. He decided that for a spell he needed to keep his unhealthy stepson