

WE WERE NOT MEN

Campbell Mattinson

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For Mum and Dad

Part I

Every time I look at our picture of Mum I feel as though the sun has been brought in from outside. Eden and I have looked at it so many times since she died that we know the number of stripes on her swimsuit and that the nail on her little finger is longer. We know that our Grandpa Jack took the picture because we can see him reflected in the amber eye-bits of her goggles. She has them pulled down around her neck like a band of black and gold. Grandpa must have taken the picture at a swim carnival, unless it's from school, because she's holding a ribbon up near her face, a gold ribbon. There's only one place in Bobbie's loungeroom with a clear view of this picture, the seat up the kitchen-end of the couch. We call it the seat with the view. Eden and I have fought over this seat since we were nine years old. We look at that gold ribbon, back-lit and bright, and wonder where the sun's coming from, because it looks as though it's beaming straight out from her. I think that's why, as we sit and stare, at some point we stop looking and just bask, as if that's it, Mum was our sun.

*

We haven't fought over this seat in nearly a year now. We've also stopped training in the creek together each morning, and

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taking it in turns to cook, and wrestling for our go on the computer. Eden's my twin brother. We haven't been the same since I found him with Carmelina.

*

One day when we were sixteen I was chasing a dog through artichoke thistles when I found Eden and Carmelina together in a stormwater drain at Newport. It was a place they thought no one would look. I was no longer with Carmelina but I still thought it was the one thing my twin should never do.

*

I took the sight of them in, her hand in his hair, and bolted for the nearest stretch of water. The next morning I confronted him. He was standing by the hot channel of water known as The Warmies. Carmelina was there too, the red light at the top of the smoke stack flashing behind her. He looked at me as if annoyed and then turned to Carmelina and they looked at each other as if it was between them and not us. That moment blew so many holes in me that I could have been mesh. I rushed at him and pushed him into the water and ran to our house in Newport. I chopped my brother from my life. I blocked connections in apps, I moved to our step-grandma Bobbie's farmhouse, I changed schools. Eden and I have lived cut in two like this for nearly a year now.

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When Eden and I were nine we were in the back seat of the car the night our mum and dad died. In the hospital they told us that swimming would help us recover. Our mum had been an age-group champion at both butterfly and freestyle and so we jumped in and swam as if we might somehow catch up to her. We were so hungry for her water that we got good; we both could have swum at the 2016 Rio Olympics, and Eden definitely should have. For years we trained together, raced together, shared a slipstream and a bedroom; sometimes when we swam in our narrow stretch of creek our legs would become entwined like snakes.

*

The Olympics. I'll never forget the morning Michael Phelps lined up in the final of the 200-metre butterfly at those Rio Games. It was Eden's best event. I thought as the finalists shook out their limbs that he might text me, that it might be a good time. When Phelps then won gold, again, incredibly, three Olympics out of four, I was virtually certain that he would. I checked for a text so many times that morning that Bobbie, a bright yellow wine in her hand even at that hour, picked up my phone, burst open the front door and was about to throw it straight at the sun; but then she just stood with my phone on her chest, with her back to me.

The dreams that fail.

*

It was February 2017, early evening, when Eden finally called.

I was cooking. Bobbie's farmhouse still has an old beige-brown phone attached to the wall. It's the kind of phone that ties you to a spot. It rang.

I thought the call would be junk but still I put the frypan down and had just splashed my hands when it stopped. Then it started straight up again. Ever since that night on the road with Mum and Dad I've had this thing with phone calls and power. If the light goes off on the oven clock or the phone re-triggers in a hurry it feels as if someone's dipped their hands in the icy creek and grabbed at my bare chest. As I stepped towards the phone I did a nervous double-clap and my hands were wet and they sprayed. When I picked the phone up though there was a click like a starter gun misfiring and then Eden's voice came at me as if he'd jumped at me from the blocks.

'I feel,' he said. And that word struck me immediately; Eden didn't feel things, he did them. 'I want,' he said. As if he was struggling.

I hadn't seen my twin brother in a year but at night I still cooked enough for him and set his place at the table. I reached out and straightened Eden's fork as I changed my grip on the phone.

'Eden,' I said, though suddenly I knew that words would not do and that I wanted him to run, to swim, to race so fast that time might be reversed.

And then he said, 'The kitchen-end of the couch.'

My neck hurt then as a year of stored words suddenly burrowed back in. I looked out the kitchen window. Rain poured down. The driveway was a lake.

And then he said, 'The sun.' As if Mum was a sentence we'd never had completed.

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The Olympics. Tokyo. He wanted me to know that he'd go on for Tokyo. As if I still cared about the Olympics.

Bobbie wasn't at the farm that night but in my mind I heard the words *We've had 300 years of hurt here* because it was the kind of thing she'd say.

I said, 'You can't just open me back up and swim back in.' Though he could and I wanted him to.

He rushed on. 'Swimming,' he said as if I was a needle and this word would thread me.

And for a second I was thrown.

So I said, nothing. I said nothing. I'd rehearsed this moment for a year. And now I had nothing.

Then out of nowhere I said, 'We're a love song.'

And we went quiet, we both did.

I took weight off my legs, then. I placed more on my elbow. I tried to think of water, turbulent water and how it always flowed out smooth from behind Eden.

*

Our history. It was as if we'd been in a race from the day we were born. I came out first. Eden immediately after. I led him then and thereafter but he always came up fast from behind, always took me over.

I didn't cry when Mum and Dad died. Not on the night, not in the days after. I've stored these tears as if they were precious.

Suddenly then. Truth reared at me. Eden is my twin and this: the melody of his voice. I'd ached so hard for it to be close again that I'd dared not hear his name. My name is Jon Hardacre. Every time I'm asked to say my name I stop myself from adding

The Other Half of Eden as if my name and my very self is incomplete or unworkable without him.

*

I pictured my brother; I couldn't help it. As kids we'd clear the scrub around Bobbie's farm and I'd stop and look at the slab of his back with the kind of confused pride only a twin can know. My brother Eden is a beautiful boy. I beat him at many things but I idolised his every step.

*

They were sitting up front. Mum and Dad. Eden and I buckled in the back. It was 2009, May, the car splashing through rain. We were nine years old. We'd just left Bobbie's bush block at Flowerdale; our step-grandma lived by herself on sixteen acres. 'Remember,' she'd said, tapping on the driver's side window, 'the cowards come out at night.'

'How much wine did you drink?' Mum said to Dad.

'Two glasses,' Dad replied, as we pulled away from the drive. He looked at his watch and added, 'Over four hours.'

'No,' Mum said, 'we finished two bottles. I hardly had any.'

'Was there much left?'

'Dregs.'

'She seemed all right,' Dad said.

'I wish she'd baby things up a bit,' Mum said.

Water gathered on the windscreen. Dad put the wipers on intermittent but on the second pass they screeched.

'Dad,' Eden said.

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Eden had drawn a rectangle in the fog on his window. I wanted him to start eating his jelly beans so that I could.

‘I loved the bit about the skateboard,’ Eden said as he divided the rectangle he’d drawn into lanes.

Bobbie had made Eden and me a hot chocolate just before we left. Dad glanced at us in the rear-view mirror. His eyes were so pale brown and milky it looked as though we could drink them.

That afternoon at Bobbie’s, Dad had played a video on Duncan Armstrong, the winner of the 200-metre freestyle at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. When Mum was a kid she’d swum squad five mornings a week; her body still had the look of a hard-boiled egg. Dad could hardly even swim but he’d got in before the video’s narrator and told us about the American Matt Biondi and the 2.13 metre wingspan of German Michael Gross, Armstrong’s rivals.

‘I told them the story,’ Dad said to Mum, adjusting the sunglasses he had propped on his head, ‘of how Duncan Armstrong built up his upper body by going out at night and putting his chest flat on a skateboard so that he could pull himself up a steep hill with his arms.’

‘And his coach,’ Eden said.

‘Lawrence,’ I said.

‘Laurie Lawrence,’ Dad said.

Mum pulled a box of tissues from the glove box and wiped fog or water from the inside of the windscreen. The car heater was on and my lips felt dry and I licked them.

‘His coach used to tie weights to his waist and chuck him in the diving pool,’ Eden said.

‘Be strong or drown,’ Dad said.

And so we were thinking of a swimming hero wearing weights in a pool when Mum gasped. As we saw a ute up ahead with something long and shiny strapped to its roof. As Dad screamed the brakes and wrenched the steering wheel to the left. As we saw the road with its sand-coloured pebbles and overhanging gums become sucked into nothing by the ute ahead, out of control, sliding through the bend.

Nothing slowed down then. It was just all about speed. The speed is what I remember. One second led to the next and then time just seemed to skid.

All Dad could do. He shot his left hand across to Mum. To her thigh. And rested it there. Hopeless. As we hung. And waited. Seemed to glide like a practice stroke. Air from the heater. I remember the sound of the fan.

Dad flicked the windscreen wipers with a finger. One last screech.

Then, everything, the whole booming lot. A torrent of breakage. The ladder was shiny like silver and it fired from the roof of the ute and came straight through our windscreen. I blinked and ducked like it was lightning and we were inside it. We spun sideways through the air like we'd landed on a lazy Susan. We shattered against a pole and bounced into a tree. Bark in my teeth, coughing up resin. Seats and glass and metal whistled. Suddenly the smell of petrol and of something stronger. It wasn't quiet because there was screaming but all sound suddenly seemed isolated and small as if sound itself had been relegated. In a moment everything felt frighteningly still and wet. I felt calm, I felt panicked, I felt alone. I coughed and liquid burst from my nose and I let everything go without looking for a toilet. I was inside the car but air brushed my face

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and as it did I felt something like nervousness.

The car's roof, can-opened to the air. I couldn't see Mum's head but I could see her body; I thought she was bending down; her body was twisted as if she was in a rush, as if she was coming, just hold on. Dad, he clutched at his legs. I stared at him. My collar felt weird and scratchy and I tugged at it and Dad's sunglasses were down the back of my shirt. I tugged again and they caught and I didn't want to break them because they were new, they were a present. I tried with my other hand and my chest seared and the glasses wouldn't come and it was frustrating and I expected help or not really but I didn't want to admit it. Dad's glasses finally untangled and I had them in my hands in front of me. They were warm to hot. They were sticky. I held them out and a glint of gold peered through black-red gunk and when I tried to call to Dad my voice or my mouth just bubbled.

Time. Every thought, sound and thing seemed unaligned, all the colours split, every channel untuned.

I allowed myself to know then that the far-off distant noise was coming from my dad and that he was not turned away but was turned to me and that his face was front on and close-up.

'Mum,' I said, though I was looking at Dad. 'Mum, are you okay?'

There was a hissing sound, there was smoke or steam or mist. There were calls, human calls, hurt. I could not yet hear sirens. My dad groaned and breathed, groaned and breathed. I shivered. I wanted to take my jumper off. It hurt to move. I twisted at the broken arms of the glasses. At some point I realised that Dad's groans were not as loud as they had been.

'Mum, are you okay?' I said again, I needed to. If I said it twice I whispered it a hundred times.

What I could smell most strongly was hot chocolate. That mug of hot chocolate Bobbie had made us. Eden's head was in my lap and he'd spewed on my legs and I could feel it dribbling down the bare, torn skin of my calf.

I did not pass out then. I realised something, slowly. Mum was not twisted awkwardly. She was not looking down at her bag. She was not about to pass something to Eden and me, something to make us feel better, something she knew we needed before we did. The curve of her body had that look to it, that bending down to get something look, because she had been decapitated, because our mum was in two places and neither of them were where we needed.

Light. Orange light. It swirled from a van or truck.

My own head bruised and bleeding, a gash between my eyes. Mum's head had kissed or smashed into my forehead as it had shot past. There was hot blood in my lap. It streamed from my face, my chest. It was mine, it was Eden's, it was Mum's.

Then, something else, the first repercussion. Eden shook violently. He'd started to fit. I placed a hand on his nine-year-old back and touched his face and he did not feel cold but he felt wrong. His pulse scuttled at an enormous pace, I could feel it in my legs, my thighs. His eyes were closed. Colour in his neck. But his face pale. There was smoke or mist or something in the way of my eyes. I saw less, I felt more. I tried to get my jumper off again, more desperate this time. I wanted to fling it over him but I was so fumbly and frantic that I gave up and just wrapped him in what I could of me. His fitting slowed. I curled beside him and against him. I shielded him from the rain. Everything was so bloody and wet and cramped. It was as if we were still in the womb.

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Eden. I kissed him above the ear. Blood dropped from my face onto his. I touched at my eyebrows and wiped at my cheek and the pace of my hand slowed as it moved through gunk. Not nervous then. Terrified.

No people out there on the country road save for broken people. I couldn't move my legs because they were pinned and I was nine years old and something had struck me in the forehead and I couldn't think about it. Instead I thought of Dad. I wondered when he would stop groaning and unpin his legs and help Mum, help Eden. Get us ready for bed. Our bedroom. Wallpaper on one wall with racing cars on it. I wanted home. I wanted bed. I wanted Mum.

At some point my memory of these moments turns yellow and warm like sunshine. Later at the hospital and afterwards I've had to stop myself from thinking that these events happened in daytime, in bright yawning merciless sunshine, when it actually all happened when it was gloomy, wet and near-dark. But the smoke or the mist gradually evaporated and emergency lights went up and I saw everything clearly as if there was bright sun shining on it all.

And then for the first time I heard the sound of whimpering. Or whistling. Coming from me.

Dad stopped groaning. The eerie savage stillness.

'Jon,' he whispered. He bled and sweated and he didn't breathe, he panted.

'Dad!' I rushed.

'My God,' he said. He looked around. 'I must have been out.' He looked down. He reached for his legs as if unsure where they were. 'Can you get out?' his voice husky.

'Dad!' I said again. 'Eden's been fitting and he's asleep and he

hasn't talked and he's cold and something's wrong with Mum.' And then it became too much for a nine-year-old boy. So I stopped. And hoped that Dad might take over.

But he didn't.

So I kept hoping.

Until he said, 'I just washed the car.' As if it mattered.

Until he added, 'I want to help.'

And that was all he said. His eyes closed. For what felt like a long time. Long enough for me to acknowledge that his legs were crushed. That his hand still felt for Mum.

Mum.

Then Dad spoke again. He almost sounded careful, as if counting his breaths. 'They handed you to me. Held you both up. Twins. Born. In the light.'

A jelly bean. Lodged in his collar. I stared at it as Dad's words faded. As I saw his arm fall from Mum. As I saw that a nick to the band of his wristwatch was causing it to peel and then pop away from his arm.

*

And as I sat silent and took in what was around and that our dad was no longer moving, I heard my chest crack each time I breathed. And when I looked down at my blood-drenched shirt it sagged when I dragged in air and lifted when I breathed air out.

*

The rain turned heavier then. My legs were pinned and my

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chest seared if I moved and then came the sounds. From the other cars. Groaning. Yelling. Water running down the trunks of trees. Leaves brushing and slipping. A woman sobbing like a black storm had just busted out from her.

Alone. A twin. The noise. It wasn't the obvious, the hurt, the blood, the dead. It was the isolation. Nine years old. No one there for us. Eden. Just Eden. I'm nine. We're nine. I said that. Out loud. We are nine years old.

I pushed. I had to. Get out. Just get out. I pushed and kicked at the front passenger seat, pushed hard, both feet, my whole legs, driving at it, desperate. The seat had Mum in it or most of her but its hinge snapped and her whole chair moved. Because it had buckled. Down the middle. Mum flopped forward, lifeless. Lick the cream off the beater, Mum. Wrap my arms around your waist as you stand and talk, Mum. The void then of both Mum and Dad quiet. No jokes. No puns. No throwing footballs or wrestling on the couch.

I regretted it. Instantly. I regretted moving Mum, it wasn't right, I might have hurt her. I knew she was dead and I was fully aware but still I worried that I had hurt her.

I twisted then and unbuckled myself. I tried to lift Eden and get out of there. My chest like a burn, like a scorch. Door open, flung clear in the car's somersault of shatter. Lifting. Pain from all the wrong places. But able to move. Eden dropped onto the wet earth outside. Tried to lay him down softly. So incredibly thirsty of a sudden. The cleanse of rain. Leaves and twigs and grass. Eucalypts. A wet forest. The smell of petrol or exhaust or a milkshake. I felt it. My clothes. Wet with blood. It felt like the blood was alive. That thought got into me. It was Mum. The

blood was Mum.

*

Rain. Stop. *Please*, I thought, *please stop raining. You don't know.*

*

And then there were hands on me. And I was asked where I hurt. And I was pulled away by someone who did not smell like our mum or dad or even like Bobbie. And I saw again that lights flashed, a bright orange sunset haze swept the road as if the world was a globe that could shatter. Someone in a yellow raincoat bending over Eden. A packet of Monte Carlos on the side of the road. Opened. Tiny little crumbs of sweet biscuit. 'Who moved him?' the person said.

And I said, 'Me.' And then I coughed. As my throat clogged. My chest. I was a mess. There were people here.

'Best we don't move him again,' she said.

So I said, 'He was fitting.'

And she said, 'It's okay, it's okay, I'm here to help, I need you to stay calm.'

As that horrible sag of my chest clawed at each breath. The blood. It rolled. Like a slick. Like seabirds could drown in it. Like that's it. I'd survived. Only to drown.

'Don't look, don't look,' she said, because I'd turned, I had to.

And so then, right then, I emphasised or at least I tried to, 'He's my twin!' And I tightened an arm around Eden and reached my other arm towards the car, towards the shiny screwed up car.

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The metal. Cold and wet.

‘Just be calm,’ she said. And she was looking at me but she was glancing at Mum and I know that’s where she didn’t want me to look.

And then she called out, ‘More here.’ And then almost instantly she yelled, ‘Over here!’ And then again, like she too was caught up in it, ‘Blankets! Covers! Quick!’

And then she cut Eden’s clothes up the middle like she was parting sausages. And I saw the bare broken body of my twin. And I heard her say ‘Sharps out’. And there were people around but they were blurry and few. And I saw her strap his arm and dig a needle in and inject something, then yell to someone else to call out for a MICA. ‘Tonic,’ she said. Then, as she grabbed a gadget she had attached to her shirt, ‘Brain,’ she added.

And I was looking at Eden when a man cut my own shirt open and said, ‘Crikey’ and then said, ‘We’re going to need more choppers.’

And then suddenly it was crowded and bright like the beach in summer. As if we’d been washed up, as if we were something to see, despite it being dark, despite it being night. There were waves of people and lights and beds and boxes all swarming like bees. And in this bustle I lost sight of Eden though I kept trying to see.

And then I heard the word or the letter K and I was injected and it had no effect so it must have been working. The feel of rain or blood in my eyes. ‘Eden!’ I called out, hoping he would return my call but if he did I did not hear it.

*

And then they flew us fast in helicopters.

*

Different helicopters. As if they didn't know that we are twins. So I fretted. And wondered. And kept trying to see. And then on a trolley at the hospital I looked and he was there. I thought of smiling but he wasn't running or standing or wrestling but instead was lying down. And so I didn't, I didn't smile, I stared, shocked. And thought that I should also look out for Mum and Dad. That it might be my last chance to see.

Eden and me strapped side-by-side. He woke. Tried to sit up. Asked a nurse to move him. 'Where's Mum and Dad?' he asked. Straight away. Like firing up a drill.

'Not here,' I answered, a breathing mask, I could lift it.

'Where are they?'

'I don't know.'

He slumped. They attended. He pushed back up. 'Are they still in the car?'

'Yes,' I said.

'We can't leave them,' he said.

'There are people there,' I said. And I turned my head and there was moisture on his arm, from the rain maybe, and I was still thirsty and desperate for water and as I thought of licking the water from his arm a doctor held my hand and I didn't care about medicine or surgery, I just wanted that doctor to keep holding my hand.

'They were hurt?' Eden asked.

'I'm sorry.'

'They need us.'

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‘There are people,’ I said.

I tried to cough but when I put my hand to my mouth there was blood and it could have been mine but I wondered again if it was Mum’s.

‘You left them?’ he pleaded.

I said nothing.

‘Tell me you didn’t.’ He didn’t say these words, he held them to me.

And when I said nothing he said, ‘They are our mum and dad.’

And there was fog or breath or a mist of water on the window frame of the hospital wall and I looked at it and wondered if it was a mirage.

And I whistled across tubes of plastic, ‘Yes.’

And he said, ‘Mum wasn’t wearing a jumper,’ as if he was worried that she’d be cold.

And I said nothing again because I felt embarrassed because I had time and because I could have put a jumper on Mum.

And Eden said, ‘We were talking about the Olympics.’

*

Wheeled deep into the hospital and swung away for scans. They slid me into a hole and pumped Coldplay through headphones though the beep of the machine drowned it out. All I could think of was Mum and Dad on that wet road and the swirl of orange light and the smashed-up packet of Monte Carlos. On the road I’d seen a baby-sized lump beneath a white blanket with a tiny hand hanging out. This hand still had a hard-chewed rusk for teething in it.

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I didn't see my twin again for more than five days.

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