CONTENT WARNING: COARSE LANGUAGE

Changing Carriages

The staccato ringtone of the phone echoed through my unfurnished rented shitbox of asbestos-ridden home. I'd moved to save money but regretted my actions. The house had become my prison and I felt disconnected. I answered it on the sixth ring, still half asleep: on edge with the events of the last three months. 'Hello?'

'It's me. He's nearly gone. You better come in, Pete.' My sister hung up.

I dressed, put on my riding jacket, boots, and helmet, and then rushed out the front door, keys in hand. Dew had condensed overnight and covered my motorbike in tiny rivulets. I wouldn't say I liked leaving my new Triumph Speedmaster out in the weather, but the rental had no garage. I wiped the saddle seat twice with one hand, leaving the maroon fuel tank alone, and mounted the bike. The wet seat penetrated through my jeans. They would dry eventually.

I lived on the Redcliffe peninsula in Brisbane. It was a twenty-minute ride to the hospital, across a three-kilometre-long bridge spanning a river delta to reach the other side. An old disused lower wooden bridge lay off to the western side of the new bridge, appearing rickety, it piles leaning over in places, giving a sense of inevitability, like it was dying slowly from the bottom up. The tide was out, and the sandy mud of the river lay exposed in a display of nature's whims: deeper tidal streams surrounded the sandbanks, the green tide gushed out onto Moreton Bay - like a plug had been pulled out somewhere nearby.

Dad was always talking about the other side. Crossing over. Changing carriages. He'd started chatting about death ever since his first heart attack a few years earlier. He was fascinated by it and would start some sentences with 'when I go . . .' or 'after I die. . .' It depressed me to think about it, but I went along with his developing sense of mortality.

I hit the bridge at 130 km/h. I remember the day well: 4:30 am, February 16, 2004. The rising sun sketched a cloudy sky in soft shades of pink and orange. I rode over the section splitters of the bridge, the Triumph rumbling and lurching beneath me, thinking about Dad lying in his hospital bed, an

unfortunate ghost of what he used to be. They would all be where I left them last night, hovering over his body, probably arguing among themselves about God knows what. Family. No wonder Dad had chosen to stay away for so many years: they were impossible. The finality of his passing had brought them all together to grieve, but the old angst between them reared its head and overflowed onto Mum, my sister, my brother, and me. If conscious, he would've told them all to fuck off and leave him alone. I wished I had the same conviction as Dad, but I didn't. I was too diplomatic, not wanting conflict. I gripped the throttle and flicked my visor down as a stray piece of meteor or space debris entered the atmosphere and shot across the sky from west to east, chasing the sun.

I knew then. He'd departed much like his arrival fifty-three years earlier.

I slowed the bike down. No point in speeding.

Dad was crossing over.

After his first heart bypass, we used to sit on his back verandah of the renovated Queenslander, drinking cups of tea and talking. Dad remembered being ordered to bash Aborigines in the city police watchhouse. 'Policing was done so much differently,' he said. Orders and rampant 1970s-style corruption made Dad quit the force after four years of torment. He later moved us all to the Northern Territory and worked with the local Yolngu building bridges as a boilermaker.

'Make sure that Mum is ok if I go early.' He was forty-seven when they performed the bypass, so I guess he figured his body might let him down. Not to be fatalistic: he took up walking morning and night, lost weight, ate a balanced diet, and followed the surgeon's recommendations. This didn't stop the progression of the disease. Something else remained while he fixed his dicky heart, lurking in the recesses of his torso, taking over his body in a military-style coup.

The second heart attack at fifty-one took everyone by surprise. The doctors split his ribs down the middle to access his ailing heart. On the day of the second bypass, a booking had been made for him to have a colonoscopy. He was too busy worrying about his heart to rebook another one. He'd attained a refitted, refurbished, and working heart, pumping like normal, with no blockages. Dad didn't realise, but the rebellion in his gut advanced on every organ, deploying cancerous tumors at whim. He concentrated on his walking and recovery. We soaked in the sun on the back verandah for

weeks, Dad holding his chest and snoozing, allowing the overthrow to reign within its sealed sanctuary.

While sipping his tea one afternoon, Dad remarked that he would like to go on a train trip to explore western Queensland with me. He said, 'It would be great to go underground, wouldn't it? You know, the mines?'

'I don't think I'd like that — I get claustrophobic.'

'Don't be ridiculous. There's plenty of room. I've always wanted to see what it's like. C'mon, be a sport.'

'Only if we go first-class, Dad.' He'd never done anything first-class. 'Should get a sleeper. I can't sit in cattle-class for twenty-seven hours. It would do my head in.'

'Ok. First-class sleeper it is. We can stop off at Townsville and catch up with Graham Hutchinson, you know the police inspector? We went through the academy together. I'm sure you've met him.'

The curtains were open in the palliative care ward. Dad lay on his back, his face gaunt, his once broad shoulders now ragged remnants of sunken mountains. A blanket covered his fluid-filled torso and legs, hiding the disease: his complexion was yellow. The women silently stood vigil around his body. My brother and uncle waited outside the room. Mum sat next to him holding his hand. I walked over to check his pulse. His hand was cold to the touch. I couldn't find a heartbeat. I looked over at Mum.

'He's gone, isn't he?' Her eyes glistened with the raw pain of mourning. She was exhausted from a lack of sleep.

'Yes, Mum. I better call the nurse.'

At least we managed to go on the train trip out west like he wanted. It was winter, so the heat of the tropics gave way to pleasant days of cooler weather. We boarded the Sunlander train in Brisbane at Roma Street Station, finding our way to the first-class sleeper carriages. He put his bag in the locker and sat in the window seat. 'It'll be a long trip. Townsville tomorrow morning and we'll catch up with Graham. I called him yesterday and he's taking the day off to pick us up and give us a tour. Shit, it's been twenty years since I've seen him. Time flies.'

'Where do we stay tomorrow night?' I asked.

'With Graham. He's got a place in town and lives on his own.'

We spent a disaster of a night with Graham. They had grown apart. Graham had some caustic views on policing and Aboriginals. He had a cynical view of the world. He was a bitter man. Dad had entertained him though, glancing at me a few times between beers with a perplexed expression. Graham dropped us back at the train station at Townsville the following morning and we boarded the Inlander train to Mt Isa. Dad was quiet after his catch-up. I wondered what was on his mind. 'You alright, Dad?'

'Graham hasn't changed. He's the same brute that I knew thirty years ago. He couldn't entertain positive thoughts of the world if he tried.'

'Not much of an example for the Queensland Police, is he?'

'Racist if you ask me. Asshole. He's not an example of fucking anything. It makes me sick that he could rise to the top of his game and hasn't learned a thing.' He stared out the window, watching the landscape transform from mountain to foothills to the flat expanses of the western side of the Great Dividing Range. The train was slow due to track erosion caused by the wet season. As we made our way west, I couldn't help but feel disappointed for Dad; he'd learned from his experiences but Graham had remained a racist, handing down his cynical wisdom to recruits, creating cycles of chauvinism. The carriage fell silent. We didn't talk again until we reached Charters Towers, several hours later.

The highlight of our trip west was the underground tour of Mt Isa mine. Dad fudged his medical declaration; in his mind, his heart was as healthy as a twenty-year-old. I was nervous about going underground. The tension had been building on the train ride west and by the time we arrived at the mine for the tour, my bottom lip was raw from me chewing on it in anticipation. We donned our overalls and hard hats, were fitted with an auxiliary oxygen supply just in case my raw-lipped premonition proved true, and hopped in an open-aired Landcruiser troop carrier for the descent into the mine. Dad had somehow wangled the passenger seat next to the guide.

Underground, we weaved through a maze of tunnels, going deeper, noticing the earth's heat through our overalls. It was well-lit, and the guide stopped several times to showcase the equipment used for mining while telling horror stories of mining mishaps, leaving me less than secure the further down we went. I held my hands together, pushing my thumb into the palm of the opposite hand, trying to distract myself. Dad didn't look back once: he was chatting to the

guide. A subterranean silence filled the caverns when the guide stopped the engine. The walls of the mine tunnels were warm to touch. The further we descended, the hotter the atmosphere became, and I concentrated on breathing, smiling at the tourists next to me, trying my best not to display uneasiness.

When we arrived at the maintenance rooms about 1.3 kilometres underground, the guide led the group to an unused tunnel, explaining that the mine continued for another six hundred metres down. He wanted to illustrate something about safety and explained that he would turn the lights off in the tunnel for a couple of minutes, so we could experience the sensation of absolute darkness. I bit down on my lip. As he shut the lights off, I stood still.

All I could sense was my brain floating in the darkness. My limbs and torso seemed to disappear. I waited for the reassurance of the light. Dad had crept up beside me before the lights went out and reached out in the dark and touched my shoulder. 'Boo!' It was like he'd been waiting the whole tour to do this one thing to me. I said nothing. He was testing me.

The lights came on. I turned around to see Dad smirking at me. 'We better go. Don't want to miss our ride back up top.'

Several weeks after we had buried Dad, he visited me in my dreams. We were in Yolngu country again and he was helping the locals with some earthworks. It was a long day. I was a young kid and was helping to clear some room for the laying of duckboards through the swamp. He was a young man in the dream: tanned and fit. Surrounded by elders, he mounted a 40000-litre water tank stand at the end of the day. Dad was filthy from head to toe, covered in red earth, and standing under a shower pull attached to the water tank. He was naked. As he pulled the chain, a torrent of water cascaded over his body, cleansing him. He laughed heartily, his testicles rising and falling with his mirth. He smiled down at me and continued to pull the chain.

Awakening from the dream with a tear in my eye, I showered and dressed for work as a taxi driver. I'd never dreamt about Dad before and was baffled as I drove across the river delta, the sun already risen, a cloudless sky an electric blue greeting for a new day. I logged in to the cab's computer as I crossed the bridge, throwing my location forward ten kilometers to my favourite starting suburb, and waited for an early morning airport run. As the radio leaped

into life, alerting me of a time booking, the dream persisted in the foreground of my mind.

I'd picked up Bob Klupp another time in the taxi: he was a regular airport dweller. I arrived on time. He was waiting out the front with his gear. After parking the cab, I jumped out to put his bags in the boot. 'We meet again, Bob. People will start talking.'

'Not if we're discrete.' He winked. Bob recognized me. 'I need to go to the airport again, mate. It's like I live at the bloody thing.'

'You've always got the Qantas Lounge.'

He smirked. 'It's not as good as you'd think. I'll still be waiting for the bus in the sky!'

'Jump in, Bob.' I closed the boot. 'We'll be there before you know it.'

Bob was a Yuggera Aboriginal elder and worked as a consultant for the Australian Human Rights Commission. He didn't like to talk about his work much in the cab, so I steered the conversation onto the dream I had the night before. After telling him the details, I asked, 'What do you think that means, Bob? You know, Dad died a few weeks ago . . .'

'It can only mean one thing, Pete. He's with the Old People now.'

We turned onto Airport Drive. The control tower loomed over the flat landscape. Every time I drove this road, I thought of Dad, welder's mask down, hanging from the skeleton of the control tower, building the steel framework for the concrete to be poured into. He was satisfied with that job and he would always say the same thing about it, 'I was up so high on that, shitting myself.' His work dotted the map of the city, and it seemed at every turn, he would have another tale to tell. He was proud, I guess.

Dad had found his way to the Old People, his crossing over complete. I smiled as Bob walked away, and drove to the taxi feeder to wait for my next fare.