

### Sunlit lies

My father's voice replays in my mind; another story from a different time. When he was younger he'd been caught doing something wrong. What he did I don't know and, due to the years since, I don't think he did either. All I know is what he told me about how he reacted to his punishment, and it disgusted me. After an argument with his parents, my father's enraged fifteen-year-old self jumped on a motorbike to cool off while his family went into town. However, tearing across paddocks wasn't enough. Instead, he decided to unleash his anger on something more responsive; and what is more reactive than a sheep isolated from its herd. It roamed a paddock nearby with its peers, the grass it grazed tainted yellow by the summer sun. Plucked from the herd purely because it was closer, the sheep was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A rope in hand, my father tied a small but sturdy noose and placed it around the sheep's neck and forequarters. It struggled a little. Its neck twisted from left to right but its legs were rendered useless under father's weight. Once the noose was fastened, he kick-started the bike and he was off down the driveway; the sheep running behind the bike.

As the bike accelerated, the sheep bleated louder as it tried to keep up but it tired quickly. Another gear up and minutes later father had reached the main road and turned around. A bloody heap of wool attached to the end of a length of rope had replaced the Marino sheep. A muffled bleat escaped the sheep's torn face. Father revved the bike. He turned it around and accelerated back to the homestead.

Poppa and grandmother arrived home that evening to find a bloody leg on the driveway, but no sheep. They were shocked, but assumed it was another gruesome fox attack. However, when they arrived at the shearings shed, they found one of their sheep was nothing more than a bloody rag tied to the back of an abandoned motorcycle.

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Dust plumes engulf the car as it rumbles along the dirt track. Clouds of brown dust twist behind the car, tumbling though the air behind my Mazda like a plane in an untainted sky.

This trip is far removed from my normal trip. My longer trips usually constitute a visit to Maccas and then a three-hour trip to university on a full tank of unleaded from the APCO down the road. With suitcases in the boot and books in the back seat, I coast from home to home with music blaring. But today my boot is empty, my backseat bookless, and my tummy rumbles in protest at the lack of food, Maccas or not.

In fact, the only two objects that aren't usually in my car are two photographs on the seat beside me. One of the photographs is taken from afar. My father stands beside a dam. His face is undetectable. Whatever he felt at that point in time was lost in the distance between my brother taking the photograph, and him. On the back of the photo, scribbled in blue pen, is 'Dad at Jilpanger's Dam'.

The second photograph is of the empty shell of a house. The doorway is blocked by a creeping plant, though the doorway is the only part of the house the creeper seems to pay attention to. As though left for years, it engulfs more than half of the entrance, making the broken windows a viable alternative for entry. The brickwork in front of the house is as dilapidated as the house itself. Inside the shattered windows that line the front of house sit two people, both staring at the camera. Their faces blank. Father's face is propped neatly within the window frame. The other person is a thirteen year old me knelt beside my Dad. The shadows of my hand, raised against the sunlight, obscure my eyes. I can't remember if he knelt like I did, or if he sat on something the picture doesn't feature, but my father appears to be more comfortable than I do as I remember kneeling on the hard floor littered with shards of glass.

Cracked bricks have been falling to the ground in front of us for many years, shattering and chipping on impact. The more years that have passed, the higher the mound has risen as if the departed have built a sort of platform beside the former structure. Soon, it will be the same height as the brick wall. Remnants of the bricks former partners cling to their sides. The mortar is a constant reminder of what once was.

The caption on the second photograph reads 'Dad and I are where he bruetly grew up'. There is no mention of my brother who took the photos. Instead, my juvenile mind has

captioned what it saw. It saw two people in a house. What it couldn't see were the memories flicking through the man's head like a silent film.

The driveway to "Jilpanga" is incredibly long. The gate I entered can no longer be seen in the rear-view-mirror, but I feel no closer to the homestead I came to see. Instead, I see dying grass, fallen wire fences drooping to the ground and carcasses of cattle, sheep and foxes lining the road. Assuming their presence is the norm for a farming family, I continue forward unbothered compared to the feeling of anger my grandparents would have felt when they found their sheep's leg. Though I know nothing about farming, I imagine the current owners have more to do with their time than to clear dead animals from the sides of a never ending driveway. As I round another bend, my eye catches movement. Ahead, a house with its door wide open sits in the barren landscape. I feel alien.

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The usual boisterous sounds of the children, the sound of dishes against the sink in the kitchen and the hum of a tractor not too far off were absent. On this, silent day, a light breeze swung the fly screen door back and forth. It banged against the weatherboard house. The men and women of the farm were in town, at the service.

A familiar foot mounted the veranda deck. Even the boards failed to sound their usual creak.

A small whimper, occasionally interrupted by a horrible sob, carried through the house. The children were at school, dishes sat untouched on the table, and the tractor sat lifeless in the shed. A woman in her seventies sat at the kitchen table. The blue vine print that lined the white china plates was covered in a thin film of gravy.

The woman sat on one of eight chairs at the wooden table. Dated May 16, 1981, *The Wimmera Mail Times* sat in front of her.

Stray bleats drifted from the sheep outside as they moved closer to the house to graze closer. The sobs continued. Echoed from the panelled walls and the white ceiling, they returned to the woman who continued the cycle with fresh sobs. The tears rolled down her

cheeks and absorbed into the handkerchief. The ones that got away continued down her wrinkled neck, and soaked into the neckline of her floral print dress.

Her husband stared back at her from the newspaper page. The words 'Jilpanger owner dies' printed as large as his face in the picture atop the short article. The words praised his farming work and the sheep he raised on "Jilpanger", in South Australia and in New Zealand.

She clasped the paper, rose from the chair and shuffled back through the house to the front door. She passed through the door as it swung outward. A man stood outside, his eyes also red.

'Not a word in here about *him*, Reg,' she whispered as she held the paper up.

'Mum, there is an entire article,' the man replied.

'His sheep. His stupid sheep. It's all about those brain-dead chops.'

His eyes were fixed on his mother.

'I hate this place,' she said.

'No you don't, Ma. You love it here,' he said, placing a comforting hand on her arm.

She faked a laugh and lifted her hands in front of her as if presenting her son with a prize.

'Who could love this?'

His attempt to smile at her twisted his face into a pained grimace as tears followed the same path as his mother's, down his cheeks and neck. He sat down and she joined him. Her arms grabbed her knees loosely as she cast an empty look away from her son. A great shed sat to their immediate left, full of tractors, hoes, whips and other things she'd never learnt to use. Her eyes came to rest on its rusting exterior as they sat in a tear stained silence.

The breeze picked up and the clouds threatened rain. His photographed face sat scrunched in her hand, the memory of her husband persisted. In her daze, a ripple of colour caught her attention. She saw her son's house down the track, his wife visible from the veranda. The

colour of her daughter-in-law's blue blouse ruffling in the breeze, as she hung garments into the wire structure attached to the house, continued to hold her attention .

'Mum?' he said.

'What?'

'Beverley wanted to know if we could ...

'Tell her to do whatever the hell she wants. For God's sake, Reg! Her father-in-law has just died!'

She spat her words as she rose and strode towards the house. The paper in her hands crumpled in her clenching fist before she dropped it. The feet of mother and son returned to the house as Reg scrambled up in a bid to follow her. The paper blew lightly off the deck. Beaten against the ground by the wind, it tumbled across the dust.

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I bend down and lift a piece of paper from the bottom of my shoe. I bring it to my face and read aloud.

"Three for the price of ... Buy any two loaves of ... and get the third one ..."

Looking up, I continue forward and leave the photographs in the car. Going limp, my hand falls to my side and the breeze beats the coupon against my loosening fingertips. Before long, the paper escapes me. Turning to watch it go, my fringe sweeps across my face and blocks my view. By the time I raise my hand, and in turn my fringe, the coupon is gone and as I continue walking the path, a voice comes from inside the house.

'Meagher?'

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'Michael Meagher.'

The man's voice boomed loudly over the crowd. There was no need for a microphone. Over sixty pairs of eyes returned his gaze and a loud cheer erupted over the faint sounds of the farm. Sheep, dogs and the occasional ring from a telephone died away.

'Eliza McNevin, his wife. Married in 1853 and sailed to Australia in 1854. She settled not far from here in what was once known as Lawloit, in 1856.'

Another cheer broke out from the crowd, but with less enthusiasm. The sun overexposed everything as it heated the ground beneath their feet. A typical summer had let the heat continue through March and into April. A woman fanned herself with a sheet of paper.

Five boys ran in circles around a patch of dead grass and rocks. Their shoes parted the dead blade tops and exposed green glimmers. Under the shade of the large tree sat the girls with tea cups and saucers by their white-socked feet. Occasionally, one of the boys sprinted through the middle of the group of girls who screamed. Against the man's voice, the girls' outcries may well have been silent.

'Joseph was born in 1862 to Michael and Eliza,' Reg's voice boomed. A ute rumbled down the driveway. Its usually white side panels were browned with dust; its headlights and bonnet splattered with insects.

Reg's words stopped as the tires skidded to a halt short of the crowd. All eyes followed Reg's to the ute. Amongst the commotion, one of the children, dressed shorts and collared shirt, walked behind the others and disappeared behind the water tank as the voices of the reunion softened. Finally, the man's arrival and the chatter it provoked could no longer be heard.

A woman, dressed more conservatively than most, had watched the boy leave. She rose, and with a few swift paces, had left her paper fan behind and followed the boy behind the tank and out of earshot.

She paused by the water tank. A few crickets scampered lower on the tank, though she was sure their feet would burn on the sunned metal.

The boy sat and stared up at his mother, his eyes full of glee. Beside him hung a dead rabbit, a strip of wire twisted around its throat.

The animal dangled from the fence as the boy was pulled back to the function, past the tank and to the other children. As he turned back, the sun illuminated his creation and he vowed to return to play with it.

'Robert, you're as bad as your bother. I knew it was a mistake adopting blood brothers. Your blood is as filthy as Wayne's. As filthy that rabbit you just killed, you hear me?'

He did hear her. Robert wondered what Wayne would think about the rabbit.

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"Fuck!"

I try to jiggle my shorts from the fence but the tear get's bigger.

"Fuck!"

I am trying to hop over a fence into a small paddock behind the water tank. The owner of the house has left me to satisfy my own curiosities and as I stand here, with one hand pushing the wire fence lower so it doesn't cut my legs and the other yanking at the caught denim, I wonder if she can see me from the house.

"Um. Help?"

I start laughing at the idea of someone finding me like this but before I stop laughing I hear quick footsteps coming from behind the water tank. As if being stuck here wasn't bad enough, the sound of approaching children acts as a warning of an oncoming audience.

Giving a final yank, I stumble forwards and quickly regain face. Walking off, I turn to see the faces of the farm owner's children peering around the corner. My eyes catch a decent patch of my shorts fluttering on the fence. Giggles turn to howls of laughter as little fingers point at me, the denim on the fence and then back to my shorts.

The children turn on their heels and leave. Hearing footsteps approaching from inside the house, I follow the children's lead and leave.

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The shadow of passing legs could be seen against the light from underneath the locked door. The floorboards had begun to wear down. Once glossy and monochromatic, they had become dull and sported variations of the one wooden texture. He had noticed this a few months ago. The light from under the locked bedroom door seemed to diminish over time and at first Wayne thought the light outside had become weak.

After the footsteps failed to stop and the voices maintained their pitch tones before disappearing down the hall, he looked at his hands. The rope cut into his wrists and ankles more so than ever and he accepted the floorboards for their flaws. They may not have been pretty like the trees lining the dam or the bows Jillian wore in her hair for Sunday mass, but they were still okay. He was still okay, surely.

The door, painted a stale blue, opened. As always she wore pyjamas over her ageing body. She had lost her sexual appeal long before he could remember. He turned his head away and forced his eyes open to look outside.

He could see the grey night was a mere metre or two away outside the wooden window. Branches swayed carefree in the wind. He continued to watch as one snapped and fell out of sight.

A fist, a foot; either as painful as the last. Hours had passed while he'd been restrained and an hour or more of this until she'd leave. Another hit bought another whimper. The thought of his brother's toy trucks in the next room granted a passing hope to cling to. The thought lasted a few seconds. The idea of a loving family was ridiculous. The thought hurtled him back into the dark room, his mind now as strained as his bladder.

The branches continued to sway; his siblings continued their dreams and his father scribbled notes at the other end of the house. Wayne didn't know if his father knew what was

happening, but he didn't call out. Before long, the cloth he'd been tugging at for hours came free. He grabbed the corner of the thinned mattress and launched himself out the door. She didn't move out of his way. Nor did she stop him.

The door creaked as she opened it wider to follow. His footsteps were soft on the floorboards as he ran the familiar hall to the toilet. As he passed the kitchen, he saw his full glass of water from dinner still atop the table.

The little boy ran; his screams lasted the length of the hall. A cruel hand reached down, grabbed the boy, and spun him around. A slap and a scream and he was silenced, but not stopped. The flyscreen opened with ease and the dirt of the path drifted beneath his toes as it flew outwards with every step.

Several of the work-dogs looked up from near the trees. The tied ones rose, as if tempted to play with the child as he passed. The ones without rope around their collars barely moved as the boy ran across the dirt.

A chicken shed sat behind the house, a wire and wooden haven. Huddled in the back, he held his breath as she came in, a handful of rocks in her hand. She always had rocks. Her own feet, dirtied by the ground, stopped in front of him.

'What have I told you about running, Wayne?' she spat.

The first rock bounced angrily around the coup before coming to a rest near the chicken's nest to his left. The rocks came harder. The second bounced off him. The third gashed the skin near his knee. Warm blood trickled down his shin to meet the dirt now settled up to his ankles as the fourth and fifth rocks pelted down.

The rocks, some stained with blood, sat beside him. No more came, so he looked up as she smiled.

'One more,' she said.

It came so quickly he barely had time to duck. The side of his head shot with pain as she lifted him off the ground.

'Filth, utter filth. Imagine playing out here at night,' she hissed.

Dragged by her side, his hand clasped his head as the familiar sting started to subside. His whimpers grew and before long a defined dark patch had appeared on the back and front of his pyjamas, left to dangle around his legs. His pants dragged along the dirt under the weight of the moisture as they left a thin trail behind him with each forced movement.

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My own imprint on the earth is more defining. Each footstep I take adds to the collection leading from my feet. A size 8.5 print preceded by another, and another until the start ends at the base of the steps. Laceless, my once black canvas shoes are fading fast to a dirty hue.

Three wooden posts stand upright, rotting in the sun. Where I assume a fourth should stand, a green net of thorns of tangling weeds rest. The space for an entry gate sits naked. As if expecting nothing less from myself, I navigate the few extra paces to the space.

*The Chook Shed.* His voice again. Father says nights in the chook house are cause for fear alone. Looking at the decomposing straw and the broken crates that originally housed dozens of nesting chickens, no dread nestles inside of me. Those things he mentions about that little boy seem so unlikely. The idea of torture happening where my feet stand, no matter when, seems so absurd I am wondering why I am here at all. Perhaps it is schadenfreude, or maybe the mistrust I have for father leads me here in a bid for my eyes to see the horrors he explains. If the latter is true, then I am to be sorely disappointed. Instead of screams and pain, I find silence. Not silence of love, or of blood, but of life itself. The lives of the sheep, and of the farmers that once were. The property that once attained such respect now stands in mere ruins. The chicken coup shows me this. The crumbling houses show me this. If only I could see the property over the past three decades in fast forward, it might look like a scene from 2012, or another end of the world type film.

I turn back and move away, my feet now starting to hurt. The dust particles that have been resting on my shoes are now rubbing against my skin, small red marks growing into blisters are forming. The air seems cooler, and I realise how long I have been here, in the coup. The sun is losing its daily war to the moon. His rays are still kissing the back of my neck, but more gently than before. She is moving higher in front of me, almost transparent by his presence. She will win. She will survive. As darkness swallows the secrets of this farm for another day, she will live on until the next battle, which he will surely win, when she tires and he comes for her and a new day.

Ambling, the farm takes on a new feel. The darkening grounds seem less humble. Earlier, they provoked a pity inside me; an evil branding from the past and a neglected and near abandoned future. The fruits of this place have surely been picked and no more will flourish. The dust of this place is not a promise of prospect, but a sign of what once was.