

Young Writers Award 2010 highly commended entry

No one ever taught me how to shave

by Gabriel Foley

24

It was not yet noon, but the sun hung high and a dry heat simmered off the land. I focused on a small circle of sweat growing on my father's back. It occurred to me that as of today I too was a father. There was someone in the world who I would see the same way my father saw me. I was twenty four. As good an age as any to become a man.

We walked quickly. I was surprised by the old man's vigour and purpose. He gripped the tree, a Ghost Gum, we were planting to celebrate David's birth. Gripped so tightly that his knuckles whitened. The cows watched us as they always had.

Our valley was alive with natural noise, rustles of grass and calls of birds. Noise so familiar it was like walking through silence. A dirt road wound through the hills that surrounded us; we were not so separate from civilisation.

The paddock we were walking to could be seen from the back verandah of the house I'd lived in my entire life. The house was all misshapen timber and iron, from another age. The back steps led straight down to dirt, then the land sloped away sharply, giving a view of the valley on the eastern side.

The lower paddocks had been cleared of trees, except for one paddock that had been spared from the axes. There were Ghost Gums here, all planted in a tight arrangement at the far end of the paddock. Like they were huddled together, frightened and wary.

I smiled at the thought of us planting David's tree here.

"By the time he's grown he won't be able to tell it from any of the other trees," I said.

"By the time he's grown," said my father, "I doubt it'll matter."

I half expected him to shake my hand, to impart some wisdom, stories about fatherhood or responsibility.

"Let's head back," he said.

Later that day my wife died. Complications during delivery. I promised David I would tell him stories about her every day. I kept that promise too, until about eight months into his life. I went to bed and realised that I had not spoken about her to him that day. I crept back into his room, he lay sleeping on his side. I considered waking him to talk about his mother, but went back to bed instead.

After that, I never mentioned her again.

25

David started walking when he was just past one year old. Outside, in the paddocks, he still loved to be carried by my father. I watched as his tiny legs stretched and kicked off against his grandfather's body. The two of them, so alike, had really bonded.

They stopped to pull bark from a tree, David running his hand flat against the trunk to find a section he could peel. When he found one, he whipped it away from the trunk in one motion, squealing with delight. My father held him higher, to reach another spot of bark, and David ripped

again. This time he held the piece triumphantly above his little head.

My father pulled the boy down into his chest, David giggled and pushed away, then buried his tiny face into my father's beard. I looked to my own hand and saw that I too had stripped a piece of bark off an adjacent tree, unaware I had been doing so.

My father put him down and he ran. He staggered until he faced me, raising his arms up and whooping triumphantly. His face was grinning, his nose scrunched. His face, so familiar and yet so alien. When I looked at him I saw his whole life winding out in front of him. Looking into his eyes I felt overwhelmed, almost nauseous.

He fell into my legs, and I lifted him under his arms and tried to swing him. He felt heavy, unbearably heavy, and I staggered and my grip on him loosened.

Then my father was there, steadying us both. I felt dizzy. I let my father take David, crying with fear, felt myself slump hard on the ground. I looked at my father, half expecting to see pity or hate.

"Don't worry about it," said my father, "I'll put the little rascal to bed."

I watched them walk towards the house. I couldn't remember the last time I'd put David to bed. Whenever he came near me I got an awful sense of dizziness, of being pulled into the natural slope of the earth.

The ground was hard underneath me. Somewhere a bird called, louder than the others.

Over the years, my father picked up my slack. Bathing and singing to the boy. Whenever I found myself alone in a room with David I circled around until I was behind him, until he was unable to make eye contact with me. I tried, because I loved him.

It happened late one night, David must have been three or four. He had woken me up, and he stood next to the bed holding out his little yellow cup.

"Would you like some water?" I said to him, gripping the bed to balance myself.

In the dim light of the kitchen, I studied David as he gulped his drink. As I stared, I felt my hand gripping the edge of the sink. Gripping hard enough to hurt.

His gestures, his face, his body. They were all mine. My son was not my son. He was me. I do not mean that he resembled me, or that he was extremely similar. He was, down to his voice and his mannerisms and his dull brown eyes, an exact copy of me.

I put him back to bed and stood staring at him. At myself. I closed my eyes hard and opened them. I walked down the hallway to my room, got into bed. I noticed that the nausea had completely disappeared.

I slept.

35

I remember that day too clearly. My father and I stood in the kitchen, not speaking. David was returning from a school camp that afternoon. His birthday cake was cooling, waiting to be iced. Ten candles lay expectantly on the counter next to it.

We were making nachos, David's favourite food. My father stared into nowhere.

At sixty, my father's senility had been abrupt and unexpected. For years I was aware that he spoke to himself in the mirror, but lately it was like he expected the mirror to speak back.

I knew it was because of me. So many times I had let my father care for David, left him to raise the boy. He had done it too, without complaint or hesitation. There was never any mention of the terrible thought I had resigned myself to—the thought that David was me. The nausea I had felt

was dulled now, or at least I had grown accustomed to it. But still I avoided David and his identical little face as much as I could.

I could see David's tree through the window. Smaller than the other trees, but still growing. I wanted to scream at my father, I wanted to grip his arms and refuse to let him pretend. I wanted him to see the insanity of what was happening.

"Another layer of corn chips?" he asked.

When we finished, he went to his room and I could hear him rummaging through boxes. I clenched and unclenched my right hand. I had decided to tell him. Tell him that David was not David.

There was a yell from outside, a sudden and guttural sound. Followed by a sudden scraping thud. The birds shrieked and cried.

I got to the back verandah in time to see the cockatoos peeling away from the trees. From the top of the steps the land lay untouched before me. Everything was exactly as it had always been, except for the broken body of my father, face down at the bottom of the steps.

He must have thrown himself from the top step, kicked out with his feet. I watched him for a few moments, everything seemed still. Then I noticed a dark circle seeping out from underneath his face.

In his right hand he clutched a note. It was thin and yellowing, from another age.

My Son,

By now I am sure that you have realised the truth. Your son is not your son. Your son is you.

I know this, because I too was forced to realise it. For I am you too. You are a copy of me, and he is a copy of you.

The day will come when you will have to tell him, just as I have had to tell you. I cannot live without telling you, because you deserve to know the truth.

Your Father.

His body was gone by the time David returned home. I told him his grandfather had died suddenly of cancer, which was what had happened to my grandfather. Cancer had seemed so horrible a death to me as a boy, it was odd to think of it now as being less severe than suicide.

We ate his cake in silence.

49

David was twenty four. The age you become a man. I led the way down to the bottom paddock, gripping a Ghost Gum. I walked quickly, I wanted this day finished.

"By the time he's grown he won't be able to tell it from any of the other trees," said David.

I stared at my own face smiling back at me. Saw his terrible future winding out in front of him.

"By the time he's grown," I said, "I doubt it'll matter."

Later that day, David's wife died. I was the one who brought my grandson, Aaron, home from the hospital. David spent the following days standing outside, alone. Aaron would wail and pant in his cot, I would hold him tight against my body, as if by restricting his limbs I could force him into sleep.

I would not pity David, or hate him. I knew what he was going through. Worse, I knew what he would have to go through. When I looked in the mirror I saw my father. A thin brown face, a long grey beard. The madness I had felt when I was younger was nothing compared to the madness I felt now.

It had been excruciating to watch my son grow into myself. But to watch myself grow into my father was more than I could bear. I stared into the mirror, knuckles white, searching for answers. Begging. I started to wonder if my father had written me that note to try and save me, or to torture me.

In the mornings I would lie in my bed, telling myself I would not move until I heard a noise. In these moments I was anyone I wanted to be. Aaron's cries would find me. I would remember who I was.

Aaron seemed to love me unconditionally. He was unaware of anything except joy and discovery. I revelled in his untouched hope.

I gave myself to him.

60

Aaron is turning ten today, and I am turning sixty. I look older than sixty, just like I'd thought my father had looked older. For I am him now, or he is me.

David and I are standing in the kitchen, making nachos. Aaron's favourite food.

There's only one way this can end now. One thing I can do to change our fate. As I stare into David's face, I know I'm never going to tell him the truth. The truth has almost killed me, has tipped my brain.

No doubt David already has suspicions about who Aaron is, but I'm not going to make it worse by revealing who I am as well. My father's suicide was a cowardly act, and I won't follow in his footsteps.

There is one problem. My father's letter. If David finds it, even after I've passed away, he might mistakenly think it was meant for him. I have to destroy all evidence of who we were. The nachos finished, I go to my room. I search through boxes until I found the thin yellow paper. The one I could never destroy before.

Maybe I can bury the letter under the Ghost Gums. I can bury it under the one I planted thirty five years ago. David's tree. No, it would be better to bury it under the one that must have been planted on the day I was born. My tree.

I catch sight of myself in the small mirror that hangs on my wall. My eyes are wide and glossy, my mouth is open as if I have been panting. As I smile at my reflection, I realise I won't be able to tell my tree apart from the others.

From the back verandah, the land lies untouched before me. Everything is different now though. Everything will be okay. David will be spared.

I slip on the top step, my feet kick off, I fall through the air. I land hard, still clutching the letter in my right hand. My teeth shatter backwards into my mouth, my wrists snap clean. My face, our face, shudders into the dirt.

Then, silence.