

Like A Ton of Bricks

March

Today, I saved a kid from a gang of bullies. The kid is Andrew Fiddleworth, he lives half-way down the road. He goes to St Josephs and catches the train to Fortitude Valley. Andrew got off the train and made it to the alley between the TAB and the shop, just as I did. It was lucky for him, I was in front and confronted them first. They were lounging about at the other end of the laneway, ready to trap him once I got past. Spitting and smoking and pushing against each other. I shoved through and they were careful not to bump me because two of them immediately recognized who I was. One was Brian Lucas who works as a strapper in the stables behind Grandma Mead's house. He has left school already and is quite well-built. The other kid was Danny Christie who goes to a private school at Bald Hills. His mother worked with my mother when she was cleaning at the airport. Mum and Mrs Christie sometimes run into each other at Toombul and they always promise to get in touch but fail to do so.

You see, Andrew knew they were after him and he tried to stay as close to me as he could. It was the first time we had spoken to each other. Can I walk with you? I think they are going to belt me up. I was jogging past the Fish Shop on Sunday night and Danny, the one with the smokes, tried to tackle me but I pushed him against a post and he cut his cheek. Andrew was only in Grade Eight and he was skinny with big brown eyes. Sure, you can walk with me. It is a free world, isn't it?

They walked behind us, talking out aloud, talking about what they were going to do to him after they passed my place. I think they were serious about hurting him and this made me pretty angry. I knew I had to do something. I couldn't just stand there like a bun in a baker's window. I turned on them and I said: If there is any spit on my jacket when I get home you're in for it. I'm going to ring your mother, Danny, and as for you Lucas, I'm going to ring Grandma Mead as soon as I get in. The guy who owns your stables had his liver complaint cured by Grandma. She used to hand the grapefruit over the fence every morning. Now if he hears about it, he'll use a racing crop on you like he does to his apprentices. You are horse-shit, all of you, now disband. I don't normally swear but the words plopped out of my mouth, hot and steamy and it gave me great pleasure to see them back-off, hold their ground and then eventually saunter away, rattling a piece of timber against the fence. Disband, thank you Frodo, for the words when I needed them.

Andrew is quite cute in a Grade Eight sort of way. The front of his hair looks as if it has been licked by wolves. His front teeth look slightly too large for his face with a gap between them. I asked him whether he wanted to come inside and he said just for a minute, meaning until Danny Christie and Brian Lucas and their mates had finally lost interest. They have gone, I reassured him. My mother worked with Danny's mother and he knows that his mother hates bullies, particularly at work. As for Brian Lucas, get on Grandma Mead's bad side and your life is practically over. She's a legend among the racing folk. If she isn't curing trainers of liver disease she is curing horses of fetlock soreness. I explained all this from our tiny kitchen which is always hot in the afternoons. It gets all the western sun as mum would say. I made us a coffee. But he didn't say much, he was still shocked. Frightened they might get him at a later date.

Then he asked me what grade I was in and what subjects I was doing. When I told him grade eleven and the choices I made, he said: I like girls who shoot for the stars and do the maths and sciences.

March

When I rang Grandma the other day, I think I caught her at wine o'clock as she calls it. How's your mum? She asked to finish up the conversation as usual. Then she asked, how's your Dad? Still dead, I suppose. I don't expect Grandma Mead to ever slip-up, not about something like that, anyway. Of course, my Love. I'm sorry. Of course. I better be going. She sounded embarrassed. Confused maybe. I hope she is not losing her mind. I rely on Grandma Mead to calm my world and to cure me of all those winter colds and other complaints around exam time. She can still the panic inside me like a wizard lays rest upon a wicked sea.

Wow. Spooky or freaky? I think a teacher likes me. I came out of English at the same time as the other class. Then Sister Madeline stepped into the corridor and closed the door behind her. Are you coming, too? To what? I said. To YCS. I don't even know what that means, I said. I did know. But I play dumb whenever a teacher corners me. Young Christian Students, she said. And you're never too young to learn. Too old to learn, isn't it. Irony, she said. A figure of speech. To mean the opposite of what you say. Are you coming? No, I said and then followed along behind her, down the stairs and into the meeting room. She turned as I snuck by her. So you are coming then. Irony, I said and she smiled again. To use a concept is to demonstrate your understanding of it, she said.

I will just describe Sister Madeline's smile this once but she smiles all the time and the effect upon you is always the same. Think of a large flock of snow white seagulls with red beaks and red patent shoes, rising together into the summer sky. She makes you feel like the sky and the seagull, all in one go. When she explained the use of irony, it was as if the seagulls were passing through the glare of the sun. Her eyes slightly squinted with intensity. She is what Grandma Mead calls an optimist. When everybody was seated she said a prayer on behalf of the meeting. She read some words from the Bible I'd heard before at Mass. Sister Madeline thinks once everybody starts acting like Christ and caring for the down-trodden, the sick and the forgotten, we will lose interest in material things and devote ourselves entirely to developing our minds. But first we have to learn to reflect and then to act in the kindest way. We will fall more than once, she told us. Every time you fail, you fall, but every time we fall, pebbles of darkness spill from our hearts and we are lightened by it. Do you want to become part of the Great Enlightenment? She seems to be asking.

April

I went to morning Mass today. The footpath was covered in dew and I left these tracks all the way up the hill. My school shoes were damp until morning-tea. I sat in the glass church on the left hand side where the sun comes in. I love how the parallelograms of coloured light dye your hands while you are kneeling. I went before school because I had a dream about Dad for the first time in a long time. I regularly have dreams about Andrew Fiddleworth even though I don't see him too often. Each time our paths cross he thanks me for saving him from being punched up and I always say it was nothing.

Anyway I dreamt of Dad. Sometimes when you dream about people who have died, when you first wake up, you feel as though you have brought them back to life. You for a moment feel their presence really strongly and then as though your brain has remembered something you suddenly get a shock again and remember they are not with you, they're dead. I dreamt that Ted Griffin, my father had taken me to where he worked at the brickyards. He wanted to show me off to his workmates. At first they all clustered around me and I made them laugh by hiding behind Dad's leg. 'She's a shy one, Ted. Watch this.' And the man with the rough hands tried to tickle me. Then everybody turned and there was the foreman half in the sunlight stepping out of the shed. 'What's she doing here Ted? A brickyard is no place for a kid. It is too dangerous. You'll have to take her home.' But my father wouldn't listen. He swung me up into the forklift and placed me on his lap in front of the steering wheel. We drove very quickly, this way and that. Great big half-moons over the wet tarmac. My stomach bubbled like an ice-cream soda. Enough, enough Ted. The forklift got faster and faster, the circles tighter and tighter, everything was spinning, everything. And then I woke up. I was sick in the stomach. Then I realized that he died years ago and that I could barely remember him.

Sitting in Mass, stained by the glass, I tried to remember my first memory of Dad. I think Mum took his lunch to the brickworks in Virginia. I was four, Dad was twenty-two and Mum would have been nineteen. The foreman took us to where he was working, building a wall of freshly minted bricks, each balanced on their wooden support. Mum placed me in his lap and we drove into the factory where the workmen, waved at me as we drove past. Later that year, the wall of bricks came tumbling down and crushed him underneath. He never went back to work after that. Mum had to go cleaning at the airport. Grandma Mead always refers to my father as That Ted Griffin. She says, That Ted Griffin was never properly screwed down until

they carried him out of the church in a coffin. Grandma Mead says she likes to tell it straight but every time I hear this, I feel as if I don't come from much.

April

Why, sometimes, when you see your mother thinking and she doesn't know you're watching, you want to cry about something, you don't even know what? I am one year older now than when Mum had me. She was fifteen and she left school and That Ted Griffin married her and they lived with Grandma Mead until they bought this little green house. They bought the house and then Dad had his accident. I was four and Dad kind of looked after me when Mum went back to work. His legs were broken and so was his pelvis. We visited him in hospital and he looked like a praying mantis which had been accidentally spray-painted. His arms and legs were covered in plaster and attached to pulleys. When he got home he would sit on the couch. He had the old rocking chair in front of him so his legs could stick out straight. They had moulded a piece of wood between the plaster to keep his legs apart. The plaster was stained in places by seepage and the room filled up with a putrid smell I didn't really care about when I was younger. Then I accidentally dug up the cat behind the shed and the two situations were connected in my mind forever. Dead Jessie and Dad.

I don't think Mum thinks about Dad anymore. Her life is exciting and terrible at the same time. She says: I'm not to worry about her in any shape or form. Life is looking up. She has passed her dental-nurse exams and she has a job in a dental surgery on Wickham Terrace. She works for Dr Bell. He is short, bald, very kind and smells of arctic mints. His eyes are a similar translucent colour to the mints. He is not married and he has asked Mum out on two occasions. She refused both times. She is flattered but she is also frightened. She says when

you are taking Valium everything seems too much after work. She doesn't mention the bottle of wine she drinks with the tablets. Sometimes she is so tired and clumsy I take over in case she burns herself. Mum, I told her tonight, you have to get a grip on yourself. She wet her pants on the way to the toilet. I saw the dark patch on the carpet in the hall. She said that she only had a little accident but I find her little accidents humiliating and I get angry inside even though I don't say much. It is times like this that I think of Sister Madeline and how she explained how Christ cared for the down-trodden and the forgotten. How if you want to learn to smile like Sister Madeline you must devote your mind to acts of kindness. And do away with jealousy and envy and bitterness and anger. You might fall more than once but every time you fall, another pebble of darkness spills from your heart. One step closer to being that seagull in the sunlit sky that I feel when Sister Madeline smiles at me. Yet when Mum is drinking and wetting her pants and stumbling about the house I don't like to think of her as one of the down-trodden. I sometimes think I would be better off with Grandma Mead.

May

Lo and behold. Guess who turned up after tea tonight? Andrew Fiddleworth. He'd been for a jog and saw the light on in my bedroom. Mum was really bombed out and slurring her words. She insisted Andrew sit down in the lounge room and watch the news with her. It didn't worry him one bit. He had a comment for every news item. I couldn't get a word in any which way. It is like having a baby magpie in your living room. To be honest Mum brightened up in his company. Took everything he said very seriously.

Then he said: Could I speak to you alone for a sec? Mum goggled her eyes behind his back and smiled at me. You can sit in her bedroom if you like, mum advised. I can't tell you how

embarrassing the walk down the hall was. I just hoped he wouldn't smell the taint of urine that won't come out of the carpet. That boy is sure frightened of the world (practicing my irony). He sat on the bed as if he owned it. He pointed to my poster of Jimi. He played with his teeth in Monterey, Andrew said, standing for a moment to look at the poster really closely. He was left-handed and his first instrument was a ukulele with one string. He found a way to get enough notes out of it to play TV theme tunes. He was going to be a paratrooper but he didn't believe in killing people. When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace, he said. Andrew was all energized from his run and being in my room, I suppose. I told him that the Lord of the Rings was my favourite book and that I was reading it for the fifth time. Then he just stood up and said that he better be going. I like your mum though, she is young and pretty.

May

When Andrew Smart-Arse Fiddleworth said my mother was young and pretty, did he really mean it? Mum is thirty-two this year. Andrew is in Grade Eight. What is he playing at? I don't get it? He didn't say I was young and pretty, did he?

May

I'm not too sure what to do sometimes when I find somebody who has been crying. I was on my way to YCS when I found Lisa Glass sitting on the steps near the science labs, crying softly to herself. What's up? She waved me away but I sat down beside her. Lisa Glass was shattered (a pun). A witty use of word play for comic effect. My Dad has found out I'm on the pill and he has threatened to ring up Mark's parents. There is a lady-doctor in the Valley who will write you a prescription if you tell her you're going steady with somebody and intend to have sex. I put my arm around Lisa for a second. Lisa is normally so confident.

Perhaps we all live in different houses of the down-trodden, I thought. You just never get a real chance to compare your unhappiness with others.

May

Mum told me tonight it was a paper truck delivering first edition Courier Mails to the Fish Shops. Dad was coming home from the Albion and crossed the centre line on the curve. The only thing I can remember about that night is Grandma Mead turning up to mind me in the middle of the dark with a piece of white plastic over her head for an umbrella. You talk about looking like an angel (more irony).

May

Sister Madeline caught me after English. You didn't come to YCS, she asked. Bored already hey? She didn't smile on this occasion. Her eyes were as open as lilies. She seemed genuinely disappointed as if she was hoping I might play a bigger part in future meetings. I couldn't tell her about Lisa Glass in the stairwell without getting Lisa into further trouble. I forgot, I said. Then I sneezed as if I was suddenly allergic to lying. Maybe I could smell Sister Madeline's silent censure. Better watch that, she said, it might turn into a cold. And I felt the pain of being chosen for something good, something demanding and something worthy but failing to deliver. It left me feeling small and ordinary. There is another meeting next month, she said. High hopes. Given her love of irony, this was as ugly as it gets.

June

Grandma Mead came around this afternoon and made me dandelion tea. I have the flu. I've never felt this sick before. Even writing this much has exhausted me. It is enough for one day.

June

Grandma dropped in this morning. She came into my bedroom. Out, she said, go and sit in the lounge. She changed the sheets. She pulled back the curtain. She cooked an omelette and squeezed some oranges. Suddenly everything smelt warm and cosy again. She tucked me in and sat at the end of the bed and took my temperature. I knew something else was on her mind. Do you think Elaine has been acting a bit strange lately? No more than usual, I said, sounding a bit like Grandma Mead myself. Mum gets clumsy and sleepy after work. We all do, Grandma Mead said. What about angry? Yeah, sometimes. Would you call it mood swings? We all suffer them Grandma. She hugged me. She doesn't hug much, so I knew just how worried she felt about Mum. It is alright Grandma. I make sure there is nothing left on the stove and I turn off the lights when I finish studying.

That Ted Griffin ruined her chance to get ahead you know. Grandma Mead doesn't mean to do it but I feel so lost and empty when she criticises Dad. Dad who has been dead for years.

June

Mum is addicted to Valium and I think she is doing the rounds of the doctors because I saw some bills in the kitchen corner. I think Grandma Mead is having some trouble with her memory, too. I think Sister Madeline believes I'm a failure. I think Andrew Fiddleworth is unreliable and suits himself.

July

I have been thinking about Dad a lot lately. Before grade one, Dad used to mind me during the day while Mum was cleaning at the airport. Dad would be set up in the lounge with beers in the esky, watching movies. He smelt of sweat, toe-jam and Dettol. You couldn't even smell the beer. I had the house to myself and I played one game after another. I was never bored. I didn't miss Mum. And as for Dad, he was like a guardian of some wood. He was a rotting old tree with his limbs all bent and twisted. Watch my bloody beer. Every fifteen minutes or so I would pass under his raised legs. He would try to rub my head as I passed. When he got killed in the car accident, hit by the paper truck, head-on that rainy evening, I think many of my best games died with him.

Tolkien would call self-esteem honour. You don't think honour, entirely, you think what's right and have the courage to do it. Honour is what you get back when you risk everything in front of others. There is no such thing as honour alone or getting honour underneath the sheets, dreaming of fighting dragons (hyperbole, I think). You risk yourself for something larger than you will ever be, you risk yourself for the right way forward, through the darkest mountains without once turning back.

July

Tonight, Mum and I had a heart-to-heart. I decided to come out of my room and forget my homework. Mum sat on the couch and held my hand. She said Dr Bell had asked her out again and she was thinking of going for a drink with him on Friday. She asked whether I

would come to Toombul with her because she wanted to buy something bright. I said: Sure, I would. But I felt so strange. It was like Cinderella in reverse.

I said: Mum I think you have a problem with the Valium. And I told her about the bills I found beside the kitchen tidy. And she told me to mind my own business and became really annoyed. You have no idea how hard it is, she said. Then she calmed down. I have been to different doctors, she said. I just wish there was a woman doctor I could go to. I went back to my room and cried for Mum and Dad and everything that happened since I brought them together.

July

Grandma Mead in hospital. Just tests. Nothing to worry about. Routine stuff. Mum says it's her blood pressure again.

August

Mum has been out with Dr Bell twice. Once for drinks and once for dinner. The dress with the yellow flowers on it was shorter than I expected. Go for it, Mum. Go for it.

Dr Bell picked her up in a green Mini. It is the type of car mice would drive. I'm still laughing.

Andrew Bloody Fiddleworth doesn't always keep his promises. I told him the date of my birthday. He said: Why don't you have a party? I said: Would you come? He said: I'll help you organize it. That was three weeks ago and he hasn't rung.

August

Mum calls it off with Dr Bell. She is in a mess. I can hear her crying on the toilet and her Valium count is climbing through the roof. She barely makes it to work and she barely makes it home again.

August

I desperately needed to talk to Andrew. I arrived at the Fiddleworths just after dinner. Now that was an experience. It was like question time in parliament. Everybody talking and nobody listening. Andrew knew something was wrong. We walked around the block and all the dogs guarding the stables howled like wolves. He held my hand and he wanted to stop and kiss me underneath the darkest tree. And I let him. He wiggled up against me. I suppose we are about the same height.

I said: Mum went into hospital tonight. The Royal Brisbane? No, Chermside, I said. It has a psychiatric ward. O Kym how horrible. What's wrong with her? A problem with her tablets. She's been taking too many, I said. An overdose? No, not an overdose, she's on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He let go of my hand. He thought it was inappropriate to be feeling sexy when my mum was in hospital. He tried to be serious and kind and concerned but I really wanted a hug instead.

I'll be staying with Grandma Mead for a while. You know, around behind the stables. That is a spooky house, he said. I had taken him there once to drop off some smokes for Grandma. It's not spooky, it's just old and some of the wood in the stairs is rotten. Nobody is going to make you visit me, Andrew. I just thought if you wanted to, I'd be there.

August

First night at Grandma Mead's was like something out of Edgar Allan Poe. The house was empty when I got there. Grandma was having a beer in the stables over the back. I realized just how much Mum weighed, not in kilograms but as a spiritual force, a presence, a force-field between me and my troubles. All night the wind pelted the house with various pieces of debris, leaves, twigs, mangos and larger things like air-borne possums, falling stars and what's left of the stairway to Heaven.

September

So much for my birthday. Grandma Mead was too distracted visiting Mum. They are thinking of giving Mum shock-treatment. I hope they change their mind. Grandma was terribly confused when she got in. I also noticed a prescription in the bin. She isn't taking her heart tablets but a whole lot of vitamins instead. She hasn't given up smoking either.

Sister Madeline remembered my birthday. Took the trouble to find me before English started. I also noticed something on the whiteboard she had written in preparation for the lesson. I wrote it down so I could remember it. It was Aporia or being at a loss. Expressing doubt, real

or dramatic, about a situation or circumstance or idea. It might sound silly but on a day when nobody has time to remember your birthday and you don't seem to care that much either whether they do or not that the words: *being at a loss* was like a birthday present of meaning. I had discovered one more thing about words and writing. As I start the Rings for the seventh time, I realize that literature confirms who you are. The ghost in the text knows exactly how you are feeling because they have passed through this world before and knowing this helps immensely. I'm the kid from Aporia about to visit her Mum in a mental hospital.

October

When we got to the hospital we were out of hours but the nurse at the desk took one look at Andrew and Andrew's bouquet, held in front of him like a candle and changed the rules, there and then for us. The bouquet he carried was almost in tatters. He knew when it was time to go, too and ended it nicely with a hug. Your Mum is so pretty, he said in the lift but made sure he squeezed my hand as he said it.

October

If Grandma has got her facts right, Mum will have shock-treatment twice this week. I'm going to visit her on Sunday. I don't know what to expect. Shock treatment is meant to start your brain or at least change some of the chemicals in it. I just keep thinking of those frogs we dissected. The way their legs shot out and back again when we changed the current. I hope they are taking good care of Mum and not humiliating her in any way.

October

Mum was in her room and sat up quite brightly. Dr Bell, the dental surgeon, offered to leave us together but Mum insisted he stay. Grandma also said that Dr Bell had visited Mum nearly every evening since she was admitted. She says that he told her that he would rather close down his dental surgery for a month and have her back working for him than to carry on without her forever. Grandma Mead said: He's taking some responsibility for it all, something That Ted Griffin could have learnt from.

November

Took the day off. Who cares? Maths test tomorrow. English the day after: my day of reckoning. Wow what a morning. Grandma Mead and I set off at sparrow-fart as she calls it. We get the cakes and scones from the Deli on Nudgee Road. We freshen up the vases. We clean out the kitchen cupboards while we are waiting. A quick shower and a long wait.

Well when we peeped out through the curtains both Grandma and I couldn't contain our giggles. There was Dr Bell, Lance, as Mum continues to encourage me to call him, sitting bolt upright in the green Mini and Mum sitting beside him in the same yellow floral dress she wore to drinks that night. Grandma Mead says: For crying out loud, it looks like Noddy and Big-ears have arrived. In fact, Mum is slightly disorientated, maybe the medication she's on. But I liked to think she was dizzy with sheer excitement at being home.

Both Clary and Andrew notice the car outside on their way home from the train. They both come in and finish off the last of the cake. Andrew tries to hold my hand under the kitchen table but it feels so strange and awkward with everyone sitting around us. All the same, a

little bit of Aporia has been shaken from my heart and I feel lighter, almost light enough to begin my journey proper.