

1.

SOMETHING in Ben Fine changed that night.

Maybe it was always there? Dug deep into his spleen? Maybe in his adenoids? Ben didn't know, didn't feel like guessing. But the moment he saw that first bomb fall, drifting across the thick brown air, rising then floating like a slow fuel-ejecting space shuttle onto the red Persian carpet right there in front of him, it all seemed different. Something in him moved. In his bowels? His liver? A feeling of blood leaking from inside, like his appendix was somehow weeping. Now, at his age?

Christ, Ben thought, feeling something spearing into that dark place inside him that had long been sleeping. War. This close on the little TV? Thuddering automatic weapons. Stabbing detonations. Massive popping noises and explosions. All over the place, soldiers wearing Magen Davids, soldiers being kidnapped, shot to pieces, above and below, rockets swiveling into his feet, bullets shrilling through the thickly-lit room.

Strange. War on TV. Blood and guts in diminutive form. Distant, dwarf-like... fogged up surrealism. Yet this one, this one, Ben seeing immediately... this one, however midget and buckled, different. Not just different, but close different. Magnified a thousand times different. Gargantuan different.

Much as he decried war, much as he loathed and had denounced it in the past, he had to admit, this one was not like the rest; it... involved him. *His* blood. *His* bones. *His* DNA. DNA he did not always agree with, did not even always like, yet DNA that ran thick and hard-boiled like eggs in the veins.

And now, as with every other she had fought, this people of his blood, of his genes, of his hard-baked veins, he had to decide. Which side? Which side? And in the end, it wasn't a choice; there was no choice. Life so full of choices, the meaning of life, the power to choose; and yet, and yet, really, there was no choice. The answers ran in the veins.

War makes feelings rise. Divine Involvement a joke. Detached, Ancient Gods looking on in merriment, arguing and smiling over

portly chessboards and glasses of fine red wine, pointing only to the fact that once begun, in war there is no God at all. Like the dust and stone it is fought on, it has always been there: blood spearing like red ants from within your forefathers and their forefathers and their forefathers before that unto that many-th, many-th generation back, and then further back still...

War, a generational semen, carrying in its DNA not sweet little sprinting tadpoles eager to fertilise and flourish and converge in a world full of humanity, but mighty little warriors with webbing and guns of steel hoisted over their shoulders.

Your role in this battle of DNA... to sit on the sidelines just like at any footy game and bite nails, let blood rise, to burn and bubble until the tribe that has chosen you - by some unknown seminal force - scores that last winning goal, that final glorious conversion. Or misses... and throws everything upside down.

Only in real life, away from the field, away from the big game, there can be no loss. No consideration of defeat. The reality for your side, for your tribe, for your meager little band of variegated gypsies, a loss meaning the end, Armageddon, the perishing of the tribe from Earth's biting grandstand. The only thing left over, a warped name, no more than the once mighty Philistines, a Biblical relic.

It wasn't always like that.

Ben Fine had a past. A past that collided with his entire God-given band. And as he sat there and watched the explosions on his little TV, he saw the man he had become and wondered if the wild, radical youth inside the flesh was ever real. How there could ever have been a time when he did not side with this, his inter-seminal mob of stiff-necked fools.

Snorting, seeing before him the racism of his own mum and dad, of their mum and dad before that, carrying the scars and tumours of their own ice-cold Ukrainian and Lithuanian pasts into his Occidental present. Seeing them grow from hated into hater, gliding into this safe island-continent from their years of glorious and racist sojourn in a golden African past.

Turning before him memories of sitting at the dinner table arguing. Words spitting into the neck of his thin-veined father. His Father Who Art in His Own Veins. Spit shooting warm, then hot, then blue, until... serviettes flying, there was no choice but to leave the table in a deep red fog of mutual disrespect.

It was not easy to be a rebel in those days in Melbourne and join the CPA, the CPA not an organisation of Certified Practicing

Accountants as Mum and Dad would so dearly have loved - *our boy the financial planner* - but the Communist Party of Australia that everyone but everyone dreaded. That word - *Commo* - souring the breath even of the most fanatic liberal Aussie breast.

In the wrinkled, stone-white skin of ageing parents who came from that dark place in Africa - South Africa - it was nothing less than a sin. A sin! *Why did so many of them have to be Jews?* Yes, even in that country of his mother and father - *Afrique de Sud* - Jews raised their voices. Just not all of them.

And yet, Ben sat there, the neon-bright bombs criss-crossing the room in front of him, and saw how even he had come around, eventually allowing pragmatism - a vision arising from the soiled-white reality of baby nappies, of family, of parenthood - to take over from the cold dialectical logic, the so-called 'science' of revolution, and settle into a rational point in preserving one's own.

Much as he hated the very idea of it, he saw, was continuing to see, the underlying currency in his own bigoted parents' frightened chauvinism. He saw that past, a fight for them like steps on a ladder, to preserve and defend that one rung up from the bottom, and then fearing the worst when they saw the rickety nature of that rung in the wake of Sharpeville, March 21, 1960, that famous massacre of black resistors that sent them fleeing for the safety of these Antipodean shores.

In the shadow of that blackest of black African March days, they ran. Ran from the fears that clouded in their heads, witnessing the throngs on the bottom refusing to carry the white man's Pass, refusing to live and love and labour where the white man decided.

With hundreds of years of paranoid foresight, they saw their own death in the faces of the slaughtered scores who stood up that day. And teeth clenching and cheeks biting, they embarked on a new Trek, a new Voyage: to Southern Rhodesia; to Mother England; and the smallest and most astute drips of them coming to this new country, the country of his birth, Australia.

Ben sucked in his lips. Yes... in his way he was grateful he had glimpsed it, through the eyes of his parents, that raw fear. That fear of others, of other tribes, other species. It was a lesson, a warning, it was also pragmatic.

Breathing in, he saw behind his parents' ugly, prejudiced, mixed up world was a kind of visceral wisdom, a causal reality that was not just selfishness, not just greed and race-ridden but,

at its highest, driven by an innate need not just to survive but to maintain a standard, to foster a culture.

He felt it, inside his ribs, that residing sense of skeletal architecture that was passed down from one generation to the next, and actually, despite its brutalised history, hung together.

On his TV, he saw the olive-skinned, unshaven men of Hezbollah raise their hairy arms in dogged reprisal, in a kind of stubborn unyielding impudence, willing to rip the world apart to claim their faith, to claim their hegemony, and he could not help but feel the twinges of his own parents' and grandparents' abhorrence flowing through his fingernails.

It pealed in his head: *Bali, Bali, Bali*. Seeing how close it had come. The *War on Terror*, this battle against Unreason, this battle against a dark and unfathomable belief, seeing the flesh of scores of Australians blown to hell for mixing their over-exuberant sense of fun with someone else's designated Satan.

And in front of him, in neon blue and white, seeing this little country, this other little land that belonged to him too, this tiny little bastion that was pounding it out in his living room, this tiny little Satan inflating already bloated pectorals in protection of self, in protection of its Big Fat Western Guardian - the United Satan of America.

He saw the pole-bearers, their large flying flags of blue and white cotton leading the way with bold and menacing Stars of David. Shoving against them, a myriad small and tawdry flags, the yellow and green calico of an unwaveringly determined God-beholden army - the Army of Islam. A foe that etched Kalashnikovs rather than God, rather than their own indubitable prophet Mohammed into their cotton imprints as the emblems of a never ending war of justice and retribution.

Thinking he was seeing it then, that it was not just a simple racism driving it, not just a simple ideological religiosity driving this new world order, this new war of terror - but a kind of spiritual self-righteousness that was maybe impossible once it had entered men's souls to ever be driven from the flesh. The One and Only Correct Path.

And even here in Oz now, in the Land of the Lucky Men, Women and Children, he had to nod his head in agreement before the TV, seeing these Extremists of Unreason being picked up and jailed before they could end it, the possibilities... woven into a people's simple and satanic vision of life in the suburbs.

Yes, it was a war, a war beyond colour, beyond pure dialectical

reason, a war based on religious aggrandisement and spiritual adjudgement, a war awash with gods and furious devotion, a war that spread out into the sanctimonious smugness of the last drop of blood.

Worst of all, whichever way he looked, he saw he could not hide. He, Ben Fine, was an integral piece in this bloody fanatical game - just as were the flesh and ghosts of his parents and grandparents and the many-th, many-th generations before that.

There is no end, a voice tolling in his skull.

And inside his head that rising voice becoming higher still, much higher, high alto, reaching deep into the drums of his ears.

'Jesus Christ, Dad, can't you even come and help for a change!'

Miriam. It was Miriam, sweet little Mirri, her dear little tongue stabbing through the back of his lobes. Her tongue... the way she said it, making it sound like he was watching just another social comedy on TV. Just another live-TV series, merely sitting there in front of the TV, laughing and guffawing and crying to himself at the funniness of it all. *Christ. Christ. Christ.* Like this sudden blow-up in the Middle East - that involved his people as well as *hers* - was no more than some dumbly-addicting TV soap. Couldn't she see it? Couldn't she hear the noises in his eardrums?

'Yes, Mirri, yes. Of course... *Shit!*' Calling back, breathing that last word into his chin, more or less choking it in his throat, not wanting her, his dear beloved daughter, nor his wife, his dear beloved Ruth, also busy in the kitchen, to hear the toxicity of it. A man of pragmatic reason, unwilling to fight this war on yet another front.

And somehow, hearing his response, it seemed they were just happy for the time being to put him on his guard, leaving it at that. He too was happy. Very happy with that. Continuing to sit there, stiff yet round-necked in front of the TV, hands draped like an African shield across his abdomen.

'Hezbollah! Hezbollah!' Calling to himself, mimicking it, intoning the word like it had just been pulled from some magic man's hat.

And then smiling to himself, suddenly doing tricks with words in his head, calling into his temples: '*Hex-boo-lah! Hex-boo-lah!*' Proud of himself, his magic word contortions, and yet in the end, in the very end, despite the annoying presence of his wife and daughter, having to admit it. Having to: that like the rest of the world, he too was awed by this little Army of Allah. This rough and hairy rag-a-tag army that by its sheer resilience, its uncannily

unkillable spirit, its sheer sorcery, was standing up to the might of a sophisticated people's highly professional military columns, it's rolling tanks, its weapons of technology and thunder. *His People*.

Biting a near hole into his bottom lip, feeling white concrete sink into mushy bits of flesh, he opened his mouth, seeing the two armies battling heads, seeing a bloody clashing of Chaldean forces. *Hexxx-booooo-laaaah* versus *Yisss-raaa-elllll*. The One God clanging iron and lightening against the One God. A fight to the bitter, mystical end.

A pounding of muscle and resent started with a family feud fuelled with the entry of the One and Only God, creating Jacob, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, to become Israel, to make steel and ornament from milk and honey; and Ishmael, first son of Abraham and some Egyptian servant wife, Hagar, to be packed off into a land of tents and desert and obstinate sulking opposition.

Ben hearing in the background to that great clanging of Biblical opponents: 'There are still some dishes in the sink for you. When you've rinsed them you can put the dishwasher on... But when you're ready, of course. *Herr Holiness*.'

To the side of him, Ben seeing Ruth, his wife, his cherished wife, and Miriam, Mirri, his reluctant daughter, the two of them eyeing him like he, *he* was responsible for all that happened not just in his house but everywhere in the entire world.

Breathing out of the sides of his head: 'So, because I am interested in what's going on in the Middle East, I must finish the cleaning up? Is that it? Is that it? *Shit!*' A voice huffing instead into the air of reality: 'Crumbs, what about Mirri? What about your daughter? She's right there beside you. Doing nothing right now. Jesus, you'd think I was the only one in this bloody house.'

With Biblical precision, a tongue spitting back: 'Yeah, too bloody right, *Dad*. That's exactly what you *do* think. God forbid you should have to take your eyes from the TV.' Standing behind her mum, bold eyes hidden in the shadow of Mum's infinite vine of yellow-grape curls.

'Yes, *God forbid*...' Ben's throat dropping. 'This is about your people, you know? *Your* people, Mirri.'

'*My* people? My people *are* Australian. My people are in the kitchen. And if you mean Israel, *my* people are making me feel ashamed right now. My people! My backside!' Seeing her turn like a gun-sight to her mother. 'Just listen to him, Mum. Did you hear that? His Royal Bloody Highness. King Ben in *Toches!*'

In front of him, visualising his own father's neck, the thin

blue veins swelling and bursting, telling him to get to his room. No dinner, no spending money, no nothing. Seething in his own neck, shouting but of course not saying: 'Pffhhhh, a man and his castle. More like a woman and her bloody smarty pants daughter and their brutal suburban penitentiary!' Calling instead: 'OK, OK. Just hold your horses. I'll get there. I'll do it. I promise.' But not actually moving, knowing eventually there will be no choice, he will have to do it, be a part of that unbearably illogical room of dishes and dishwashers.

My people. My backside! Finding himself unconsciously ducking, swearing, *Jesus frigging Christ!* Knowing they were absolutely capable of reading him, of seeing inside his flesh on that unfathomable psychic radar of theirs. And then he was ducking again, this time in shock, seeing in front of him a low-flying comet-type thing coming towards him, heading straight for his retinae, and then, and then... landing on an already bombed out building in Haifa. In Haifa! *Christ, bloody Christ.* A city born of his DNA. Of his many-th, many-th generations. Thinking of his other daughter, his older daughter, Hannah. Petting his forehead like inside was a God that answered prayers. Yes, yes, Hannah, who had shifted out and was now, to all intents and purposes, happy and enjoying life overseas. In *Terra Old and With-it. Bobbeh England.*

But at least not there. Not there at this moment in time. In Haifa, Tel Aviv. In bomb-attracting Be'er Sheva, in Ashkelon. No, rather in London. *The Granmummy City.* The Great Royal House of Safety and Awareness that had overseen the division of nearly every parcel of land on Earth, making the entire world untenable, in need of bigger and bigger men with bigger and bigger armies. Now a leader in fashion, art, theatre, song and dance. *Bloody hell.* Where else would a young Jewish Aussie girl want to go? *Israel?* Maybe, maybe for a quick sunbake. A day-trip to the ancient miserable walls. But to live? Not on your Nellie.

Ben Fine feeling his head like a lighthouse, seeing his daughter poking a braided skull of African doll hair through the kitchen door. The hair that had cost him \$400 to weave into tightly coiled mats of thin strings that made her look neither Australian nor African. Not even Jewish. As if she would want to. Threads of hair that were just, he knew, *cool. Sooo cool.* As she would put it, *like different.*

Her head now, through his lighthouse eyes, angular yet poised, Egyptian prophet-like, jabbing like she could actually

hear what was inside his mind. Feeling his lighthouse drawing back, expecting the worst.

'OK Dad, no worries, I'll do it. I'll finish up the kitchen. You owe me one, hey.'

Sitting back, surprised, exhaling. Everything about her so diminutive, so sweet, so Ancient-Egypto explosive. So possible... to love and hate at the same time.

'Thanks, my possum. Thanks. You're a true champion.' Ben seeing himself at that age, the reality that he was no different. His long, stringy hair keeping on at Mum and Dad until finally, finally, one day seeing his own daughters looking him between the eyes, saying, *Dad*. In effect, putting him on notice: *We need you to be sane. To be here with us. Steady. Stable. A father.*

Scratching his stomach, feeling an actual pain in there, seeing how so much like him she was at that time that it actually pinched in the stomach. *Christ*. Whistling it through the nose, eyes excavating the remains of a bridge on the road to Beirut. A grey structure blasted into waves of rubble. Seeing an Israeli jet catching the sun, shiny, clean, whistling through a cobalt sky, just only managing to accelerate and veer upwards and outwards of his TV screen. 'Shew!' A gust of wind out of his solar plexus.

Armageddon. This could be it, the end. Feeling like maybe he had not thanked his daughter enough for finishing off the kitchen. Like maybe he was losing something. Would be losing it all soon. Rattling him to call: 'Thanks, Mirri. Really. Thanks. I appreciate it, poss. Soon as we've dealt with the buggers... I'll give you a lift to uni. Whenever you need it. Anytime. Promise, poss... Just joking, you know I'll do it anyway. Give you a lift. All you have to do is ask. And I didn't really mean to say that... "Soon as we've dealt with the buggers" ... not the way it sounded. Really. This is serious stuff, I just get... I know you know, poss. Really. Plus...'. Seeing it there, her head angled, eyes of the prophetess bearing in from the kitchen, 'Plus... I know, I really know. If I do it, even though he's not here, even though he's nowhere to be seen, it does set a very good example for our new Muslim student, doesn't it?'

'What? Christ Dad. What the... ? Whatever... *fkt...*'

Glaring at her, sure he had missed it, but that it was there, that other word thrown in, that word always torpedoing in from under the chin... '*Fuckwit!*'

Hearing her voice move off, 'Oh my God, really Mum, he always so gets his way. Dickus. Like he's so interested in our *new* Muslim student.'