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## Vicious Traditions

The child wakes in his upstairs bedroom to shouts from the low part, the belly of the house. Shouts that hang airborne as paper planes. Their wing points graze the ceiling tiles before the fall, the bent-nosed crash, tail-over-tip into the carpet. The boy's bed is a bunk bed and he sleeps always with two pillows; the first supports his head and neck, while the second he places perpendicular to the first, along his left side.<sup>1</sup> This second pillow, this limbless other, he draws tight as the shouting downstairs intensifies. Two voices: one a low-frequency throb, a distant thunder he feels roll inside his chest; the second voice higher, its sonic pattern rendered in seismograph, in blue spikes that crack sharp against the blood-orange of his eyelids' interior. There's a break in the shouting. The house draws breath. Late AM rays sift through the curtains. Backlight the subtle weave in the navy fabric – leaves matted in collage. In their palmate overlap the boy perceives faces, at first in profile but which turn as the sun turns under the roof of the sky until they are transfigured as grotesque masks – their mouths agape and appearing to move like the outstretched wings of bats. The shouting resumes. He balls his eyes shut again – shut as tight fists so that across the bridge of his nose are carved concentric bell-curves of pinched skin. They have never fought like this before. Or have they? In the boy's brain, a spasm of memory.

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He is outside playing. On the final lap of a motorcycle Grand Prix around the house and garden (his 'motorcycle' a new fifteen-speed Avanti) his bike's chain leaps from its sprocket and hangs slack against the oxyacetylene frame. This loss of momentum causes the boy to wobble haphazard – arms and legs splayed scalene, geometric – and to look for all the world like falling, a slow-motion fall, frame by frame through time gone thick as paint. A fall whose end is warm hard earth, clotted blood and abraded skin and Band-Aids that pull pine needles of hair – that gum and curl and unstick in the shower. But then he catches it: gathers up the shimmy, crabclaws the brake levers and hauls the bike to a standstill. He flips it over

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<sup>1</sup> He does this to assuage an irrational fear of falling into the gap between the bed and the wall against which the bed has been pushed. Irrational, because he sleeps with no equivalent barrier which would prevent his rolling off the bunk's dextral edge and free-falling through his room's open expanse; somehow, in the boy's imagination (the same imagination in which he has seen the probable outcome, the mid-air pirouette and crunch-landing of a right-side fall), that he might tip into and be swallowed up by the narrow bed/wall chasm is the more sinister prospect.

on its seat and realigns the chain, link over teeth about the smallest cog<sup>2</sup> and goes inside, up the back steps two at a time to scrub the grease from his hands in the washhouse tub but finds his parents shouting, on opposite sides of the kitchen island, shouting, palms flat on the formica surface, shouting. They stop when he enters. Their eyes fall south. The daddy retreats to the garage to realign his spanners, hung by their ring ends on the pegboard wall and outlined in black marker. The mummy steers the boy to the laundry; she plugs the tub and runs the hot tap till the chrome neck sweats with steam and with two pumps of yellow soap lathers his hands in her own to protect from burning. She dries all four on a threadbare towel, taking up a ragged corner to push his cuticles back and draw out trapped grease. The daddy yanks the garage door down as the sun like a bowling ball rolls behind the apex of the house. He goes inside to help the mummy serve dinner. He carves the meat and she plates the vegetables. Neither talks. But the daddy does not hack the silverside; he shicks the knife up and down a steel, checks it's sharp on the pad of his thumb and sails the blade clean through the fist of meat. The mummy lops divots of butter off a pound block into a pot of potatoes; she trickles milk from a porcelain jug but she does not bludgeon the spuds. When she rattles the masher on the pot's thin rim the sound does not hang on hard kitchen air but soon heals with silence. They chew their food and watch the television, the house semi open-plan and the daddy at the head of the table turning birdlike between mouthfuls to get a look at the screen. Later, from his bunk, the boy will hear his parents' duvet-muffled talk – their voices low, like waking to a radio left on through the night. Like the radio the mummy would play when the boy was a baby, swaddled tight in yellow wool, and the daddy on nightshift again.

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The house is not far from the high-school, and after the 3:15 bell the road is choked with fifth- and sixth-formers – newly licenced – on their way home or down the dairy for two-buck Mr. Chips with cheese and tartare. The fly-screen ribbons snap in the wind and the chip grease rubs the newspaper transparent. If they see a cop they'll protest they all met there, outside on the hot pavement. That there was no ferrying passengers illegally and anyway it's not a crime to just sit in a restricted-licence-holder's car, is it, officer? Then they'll hoon past their college again, past the girls' soccer practice and the house where the boy – just home from his own school – sits slouched on the sofa and watches cartoons. Out the big living-

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<sup>2</sup> What the daddy calls the 'granny gear'.

room window the dad digs a new hole for the letterbox, shoved over into the garden bed last night by some teenagers. A whole bloody bunch of teenagers, the dad reckons, because the box is a big fuck-off column of concrete and brick and weighs a couple-hundred kilos at least. He's compacting soil with a hunk of four-b'-two when they go by, three guys still in their uniform navies, stringy-haired and downy-lipped, wringing the guts out of an old Nissan. The car is rattle-can black with overspray on its headlights. Brown vinyl dash all sun-brittled and split. They chuck a Uey in the mouth of V—— Ave and come back down the school road, haul up on the handbrake outside the house where the dad still pounds dirt. They flutter chip-wrapper onto the berm and crank their music. The dad quits pummelling. He leans on the length of timber and scowls through his sweat. The trio stare back. They snigger. The driver turns his cap backwards. He guns it almighty and the old girl breaks into wheel-spin; the axle tramps and the tyres chirp on the heat-slick tarmac and as they pull away the dad pivots and hurls the lump of wood at the car, hiffs it lengthwise from the flat of his palm, over his shoulder like a kind of blunt javelin. There's an ad break and the boy's eyes flick from the TV to the widescreen window just in time to take in the scene, the dad's arm at full extension as the wood reaches the end of its flight, punches the car, dents the rear quarter-panel, rebounds and thuds in the gutter. The near-side passenger twists in his seat and levers himself half out the rolled-down window. He shouts at the dad, still there on the kerbside, fires expletives and flips him off as the Nissan swerves down the next street. The dad collects the length of timber. Yanks the spade from the earth by its handle and carries both up the drive. He stows them in the garden shed and padlocks the door behind him. He's on the back porch, prying his steelcaps off on the ranch-slider's edge when the police car trickles up out front.

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The boy sloughs off the sheets and feels for the bunk's ladder, its thin metal rungs, but finds only carpet, his bed not a bunk bed at all – not for years – he remembers now. He wears a faded band tee with a lazy collar. The image of Iggy Pop on the front. The print is cracked across a background stack of amps and their silver grilles look torn, as if by bolts of serrated sound. He drags back the curtains. Tugs on yesterday's jeans and goes downstairs. They're in the living room. The shouts grow loud, the daddy's subwoofer rumble and the mummy's cries high and thin like chrome wire stretched between, the daddy saying she should keep her voice down, the neighbours, and the mummy shouting all the names she knows for God and fuck the neighbours, let them hear, while the daddy's hand knots itself at his side and veins

the same acetylene blue of the boy's former bike swell beneath the skin, taut now like a drumhead. The mummy goes on yelling and the boy's older sister in her pink dressing-gown on the sofa hugs her knees to her chest and the boy not knowing what else to do balls up beside her and both cry huge hot tears as the daddy raises his fist and draws his arm back like a bow and the mummy is bailed up against the living room wall, the light switch snagged between her shoulder blades so the bulb flickers sodium as she eggs the daddy on: Do It, she says, go on y'bastard, hit me. But the dad's fist hovers. His knuckles' white fades and the mum pushes past him. She sprints upstairs and locks herself in the bathroom. The dad stands facing the wall, his fist still wadded. He stares at the air where the mum used to be, blinks, then wanders toward the kitchen. He halts before the table, looks side to side as if in search of something lost, then with an animal howl slams his fist down on the glass veneer. Fissures spread across the green surface like nebulae, and the dad's hand goes the colour of raw chicken and bleeds, leaving a red smear on the table's hard edge. The boy and his sister daren't move from the sofa, except of course they must have, eventually: the boy watches himself watch the dad (the latter's hand twisted scarlet in a tea towel) pluck each fragment of glass in his good hand's thumb and forefinger and place them in a brown cardboard box. Then he takes the gathered shards to the garage, as if he hopes to mend them. To glue the pieces back together and return the pane to the table again.

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They're in the car on the way back from a court-mandated outing,<sup>3</sup> the boy watching the countryside blow by out the window and the dad flouting the prescribed ten-and-two, one hand on the wheel as he reaches into the car's centre console with the other, extracts his phone and hands it to the boy, says to text the mum and let her know they'll be back at 4:30, as per The Agreement. They're at the bottom of the ranges now so the phone should have reception. He can play games on it afterwards, if he wants. The boy takes the gadget and thumbs through to the messages, several recent in the inbox with a woman's name he doesn't recognise. The dad's eyes are on the road, though he still steers one-handed. The boy opens the latest message:

See u tonite xx

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<sup>3</sup> A classic car show in a neighbouring town; lunch at Burger King.

He thumbs out of the screen, texts the mum like he's supposed to and returns the phone to the centre console. Then he watches out the window again – two black x's etched across his eyes.

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The pub is the last watering hole on the road out of town, its carpark near empty and lit only by streetlamps on the Tuesday night the dad arranges to meet the man there. An old workmate fallen on hard times – recently separated from his wife and living out of the back of his station wagon after she kicked him out the house – he lured to the pub this evening with the promise of a couple of cold ones and a few frames of pool with a fellow of shared circumstance. The dad arrives first and parks in the dark corner of the lot, bereft of the white haloes the streetlamps throw over the rest of the place, the corner's proximate light burnt out, dead. With the dad in the car is a 19-year-old kid – his new woman's son – slunk low in the passenger seat and swimming in a big grey hoodie. Faded black jeans gone threadbare at the knees. The station wagon pulls in and circles the lot, all the windows down, the friend at the wheel smoking a rollie. The cigarette wilts beneath his moustache. He glimpses the dad's car in his rear-view, loops back and parks a couple of spots over, the dad and 19-year-old cast for a moment in the brakelights' red. He shoves the door ajar and the courtesy light clicks on; the man in silhouette leans across the interior and fumbles his pouch of tobacco from the glovebox. The dad's already out of his own car and at the station wagon's side, ostensibly to greet the man but instead he kicks the guy's door shut. The light goes off and the door's skin craters under the dad's boot and he punches through the open window, a blow that catches the guy about his ear – that tears his lobe and paints his neck and face with blood. Tobacco shreds stick in the streaks and the man throws his hands up round his head in defence, but still the dad gets a second shot in, this one collecting the guy just under the snout. In the dark it's hard to tell if the blood explodes from his nose or where his incisors puncture his upper lip, the blood shining black in the cracks of his teeth as the dad thunders:

—You leave her alone. Leave her the fuck alone.

He grabs the guy by the skull and slams his head against the seat, then hoofs it back to his own car. The 19-year-old slithers behind the wheel while the dad gets in the passenger side, too buzzed to drive, his hands shaking and his knuckles' skin flayed.

All this the mum details to the boy by way of explanation for her outburst. She crouches on the driveway with the brush and shovel, sweeping shards of the coffee cup she'd thrown at the dad. The dad, who'd turned up on the doorstep outside the court-appointed hours to tell

the mum not to worry: that he's taken care of it and the man with the station wagon won't bother her anymore, the guy having apparently sent the mum a bunch of text messages, about which the dad finds out when he cops some shit in the breakroom at work re: the guy, quote, 'tryna get into your missus'. Except the dad's got the total wrong end of the stick and his colleagues in this instance use the word 'missus' in the non-legal sense, as a descriptor for the dad's new woman; the real recipient of the unsolicited texts, it turns out, and with whom the man with the station wagon has some history. And so the mum, rightly pissed, throws the mug at the dad. It sails over his head and shatters on the drive and the mum shouts how dare he, when he's shacked up with that floozy. How dare he presume to defend her, and did he think for a moment of the example he'd be setting, involving the 19-year-old in the violence, the kid not much older than their own son. And the boy, listening, lets his mind wander. Looks down at the shards of cup like broken, punched-out teeth and thinks what he'd have done, had he been there with the dad.

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The boy keeps his toys in a big 20-litre bucket once used for soaking cloth nappies. A bucket made of that thick white fibrous kind of plastic and gouged from rough play. Scarred like the car's driver-side door, keyed one day by some mongrel in the supermarket carpark and about which the dad was of course furious, he upon discovery of the scratch stalking the aisles, trying to get a look at people's keys (clutched between fingers or fallen in the little spaces in the store-provided baskets) for signs of flaked paint. He stoops low to examine keys carabinered to belts and nearly incurs a slap from a young woman whose keys jangle music from a strap round her neck, she interpreting the dad's looks as leers at her cleavage. He demands to know from the store's manager if the outside security camera sweeps the mostly empty far side of the lot, where he always parks to avoid door-bangers and trolleys and elderly folk reversing slapdash from handicap spots, their spatial awareness not what it used to be. Sometimes the mum still borrows the bucket to soak whites, the water charged with Napisan and stirred with a wooden spoon till a whirlpool forms. She tells the boy to tip out all the toys, in a big heap right there in the middle of the living-room floor: all the building blocks in their bright primary colours; diecast cars; Action Man and paraphernalia (scuba mask/rocket launcher/grappling hook/braided rope). This chore she saves up for when the dad's not home, a sunny Sunday perhaps, when he's rostered on and won't be back till the whites have long soaked and hung on the line to dry. Till the bedsheets have been folded into one-foot-by-one-foot squares and shelved in the hot-water cupboard, their smell ultraviolet.

And all day the boy plays, launching cars off magazine ramps and ziplining Action Man between the sofas. And then the finale: a high tower built of every last colourful block. Several inches of height sacrificed for a good stable base but the tower still way over the boy's head, he calling for the mum to help stack the last few out-of-reach bricks. She lifts him up under the arms to set the crowning piece. But then, of course, the tower must fall. The dad will be home in half an hour, will want quiet and order, so the toys must go back in the bucket – now a clean and brilliant white inside. The boy combs the living-room floor with his hands. Rakes the toys into an autumnal pile in the centre. He checks under the couch for blocks fallen there post-destruction, then makes a pouch of the front of his t-shirt, using it like a loader to dump whole heaps into the bucket at once. He arranges Action Man recumbent on top – which identical position the dad adopts on the sofa the minute he arrives home, dozing off in front of the evening news and having to be woken for dinner.

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They all three are about to sit down to eat<sup>4</sup> when the boy's sister and her boyfriend pull up in the drive. The security lights cast hard beams across the BF's white Mazda, its exhaust puffing vapour as the car idles on this the first really good cold night of the winter. Inside, the log-burner's glow is mirrored in the ranch-slider's glass and for a moment the boy's sister looks caught in the flames as she approaches, her reflected image torn as she pulls the door open and steps inside. She takes off her shoes but leaves her scarf and coat on and the mum asks if they're here for dinner, there's plenty, but the sister says no, she's just come to grab a few things. They won't be staying here tonight. The BF's not comfortable after last time, she says, looking square at the dad. You were rude to him, made him feel uneasy.

—Uneasy? the dad says. More sneer than question, and anyway he does not wait for an answer. He makes for the ranch-slider but the sister blocks his way. She coils a fist round the handle and nails her shoulder hard to the jamb while a pot of peas on the stove boils over and the dad, stunned for a half-second, says his daughter's first name like a warning and clamps

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<sup>4</sup> The dad having busted up with the new woman and back in the house by the mum's good grace (or boundless pity, or forgiveness, or all three), he taking up his old position at the head of the table and she allowing him to stack his furniture in a corner of the lounge and sleep on the foldout sofa till he finds a new place; but the boy knows that at least twice this week the dad has slept in the mum's bed – twice the boy has counted the dad's familiar footfalls on the stairs and the absence of the sofa-springs' twang – and once, when the downstairs bathroom was occupied, the boy had gone upstairs to use the en suite and espied on the side of the vanity a pack of Durex and felt sick – not at the notion of his parents having had sex, per se, but at the thought their fucking might lead them to reconcile and make permanent the boy's old feeling of somehow not existing beyond the precise volume of air his body displaces – a feeling that had skipped right back through the door along with the dad.

his hand – big as the head of a shovel – round her wrist and rips her curled fingers from the door, hurt arcing through her tendons, the mum and the boy looking on as the sister grits her teeth to the pain and flails her other arm to halt the dad’s way but he intercepts it, has her by both wrists now, their two sets of hands out in front like a strange prayer. The sister pushes back against the dad and he lets her, for an instant easing his grip till they’re so close they could crush salt between them, then shoves back, reverses momentum and lets her fall. A familiar slow-motion fall such that the dad slams the ranch-slider behind him before she hits the floor, lands hard on her tailbone and the heels of her hands, sprawled ragdoll, hair all awhip and sticking in the tears that blot her face. The mum lunges to the phone and dials triple-one:

—Police, she says, assault in progress, referring not to her daughter still heaped on the floor (while the wood in the fireplace burns through and collapses), but to what she believes is going on outside, that night in the pub carpark playing split-screen in her mind. And meanwhile the boy roves the kitchen, his insides pinging: he should go after the dad, should give him what for, but he can’t. Can’t will himself to stop pacing uselessly. All he has are watercolour words: this is not on, this is really not on.

The dad rumbles in through the ranch-slider.

—What’ve you done? the mum says.

He does not answer. Red and blue lights bounce in the drive.

—Who called them? the dad says.

The boy in the kitchen quits pacing. He feels the words *I did* bloom on his tongue.

The mum lets the officer in, light behind him falling in bars across the sister’s face.

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The officer strides up to the front of the house. Pepper-spray bounces on the point of his hip. He knocks shave-and-a-haircut on the front door, just off the living room where by now the cartoons have resumed but the boy has ceased watching. Instead the window’s scene plays in his mind on a loop. He gets up from the sofa to answer the knock but the dad clops through from the rear of the house, his work-socks’ elastic so shot they bunch at his ankles. Flap at the toes like a pair of grey tongues. He gives the boy a look of *sit back down* and unbolts the door himself. The officer’s radio mutters code from his shoulder. He asks the dad<sup>5</sup> if he’ll step outside a moment. The dad complies. He leaves the door ajar and both men adopt stances

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<sup>5</sup> Addressing him as Mr. ———.

on the porch, the dad arms-folded and the officer with his thumbs hooked in his belt loops, feet planted wide as his shoulders.

—There's been a complaint, the officer says. Three young men were just down the station. Dented rear quarter, he says. Wilful damage to property, he says.

The dad's face doesn't change. He leans against the door frame. Scratches his calf with the other foot's slack sock.

—Dunno what you're talkinabout, he says.

The officer sighs.

—Look, the dad says. He gestures indoors. You can talk to m'boy. He's been here the whole time. He'll tell you.

The officer's mouth tightens. He eyes the dad sideways.

—Bring him out, he says.

The dad swings the front door wide and calls for the boy. He leaps from the sofa. Aims the remote at the TV and kills it. The image implodes in a thin white line and the screen prickles static as the ray tube ticks cool. He goes to the door and stands in the gap, obscured by the dad who motions him out, the boy barely up to his bellybutton.

—Don't worry, he says, you're not in trouble. (Here placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.) The policeman just needs to ask you some questions.

The officer crouches. Nudges his hat high up on his scalp. The boy looks at him, looks at the dad. Looks at the officer again.

—I just need to know if you saw anything this afternoon, the officer says. If you saw your dad throw something at a car. If you did I need you to tell me. It's okay to tell me.

The dad's thumb kneads the boy's shoulder. The boy looks up at the dad, then back at the officer.

—I saw the car, he says. (The dad's thumb again.) I saw it do a skid. But I didn't see anyone throw anything.

—You're sure? the officer says.

A school bus goes by. The roar of diesel and the shouts of children. Some the boy's age hang their arms out the window. Others makes faces at cars behind.

—Yes, the boy says. I was watching TV, but I could see out the window the whole time.

The officer rises from his crouch. The creak of boot leather. The dad drops his hand from the boy's shoulder.<sup>6</sup> The men resume their prior stances. The dad says:

—There.

The officer studies him, then the boy. The dad again. He unhooks his thumbs from his belt loops.

—Well, he says. I do hope there'll be no more trouble.

He gives the dad a final stare, then turns and goes back to his vehicle. He watches them as he guides the car from the kerb, the boy now volte-face but something downcast there in his posture the officer will flash on later, chewing his dinner, dressed in plain clothes. Something electroconvulsive in the boy's shoulders as the dad ushers him indoors and swipes the front door shut.

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The dad will spend the night in a cell, a white cinderblock cube. A paper mattress on an iron-sprung frame. The burnt cork smell of real human shit, he complains at the mum – she allowed to bring him his dinner, wrapped in clingfilm on a kitchen plate. Little blue flowers painted round the rim. He eyes her hard through the bars while he eats.

—What? she says. And let you do to that boy what you did to that other poor bloke?

When he's done eating she takes the dirty plate and goes home. Home, where her daughter holds frozen peas between a cruciform of her wrists, while the boy in his room goes postal on a pillow, punches it, rips/tears at the case till it dissolves in threads and the stuffing falls in clumps to the carpet. The mum glides the bathroom door shut and lights a cigarette. She sits with her backside up on the cistern, her feet on the seat like at school and blows the smoke out the high en suite window, retches between drags, guts writhing like squid within her.

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Which same position she occupies now, shielded by the bathroom door, her hands atremble as she lights another and the dad returns from the garage, the towel round his hand a red liquorice rope. The boy watches him like another species as he stands before the table again, its timber frame now naked, while the whole house heaves with a nameless bad and the boy

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<sup>6</sup> Which blooms now with the kind of pain the boy knows means the skin is red; he can feel the half-moon groove where the dad's thumb has dug but knows better than to reach back and rub the shoulder like you'd usually do with parts of the body in pain.

feels his world start to curl at the edges, like an old photograph or looking backwards through binoculars.