

Three

At Sea

My father loved the sea. From his boyhood, when he and his brothers rowed their own father in a longboat to the fishing grounds of his arbitrary choosing, until the end of his long life, my father was happiest on the water. It was on the water that I saw my father at his most relaxed ... and at his most intense.

Dad used to tell a story against himself from his land-bound years in Britain. Starved of recreation afloat, Dad hired a sailing boat on the Serpentine in London. It was mid-winter, and Dad was rugged up in a greatcoat and a bowler hat. He set off from the pier, sailed across the lake and, in turning, misjudged the wind. The small boat capsized, upending Dad into the lake. He surfaced, wet and cold. He saw his bowler floating away from him on the surface of the Serpentine. He abandoned ship and struck out across the lake to rescue his hat!

My father knew that boating and all water sports are conducted in an alien element, where life hangs upon misjudgment. Here, my father's many gifts and abiding anxieties were always at play. Here, in a theatre of unforgiving reality, my father taught his children inescapable truths.

Death by water

It is a boiling hot day in Leeton. Later, we will go down to the river for a picnic with our friends. Even though it is already quite hot, we aren't ready to go; we are waiting for Dad. As it is Sunday, Dad doesn't have any regular work to do, so he'll 'just see one or two patients' at the hospital, then we'll all go together.

We wait at home, where the flat tin roof warms the house up nicely. We wait just one or two hours beyond Dad's expected return. Lunch-time comes, the picnic is packed and ready and we are still here, waiting. Then Dad phones from the hospital and tells Mum to drive down to the river without him. He'll follow soon and meet us at Eurolie Beach.

But we can't all fit in Mum's car, so John Morrison and I stay behind. He and I sit in the curtained dark of the sweltering house and, quite soon, Dad arrives.

He changes into his black bathing costume, but instead of jumping straight into the car, he says, 'I'm too hot to drive just yet. Let's have something cooling first.' He dives under the kitchen table, where he reaches into a wooden crate and emerges with something dark green and large in his hands. It's a watermelon. It's so big that Dad has to use two hands to heave it onto the table. I never suspected there was this secret melon cache. Who else knows?

Dad takes a great big knife from the kitchen drawer and cuts three large chunks of dripping red melon that bleed juice all over our bare tummies. As we sit wordlessly on the cool stone floor, we suck and chew and slurp all that sweetness in a feast which is ours alone. My chunk is so thick that I am not sure at first how I'll get it into my mouth, but I manage.

Those unlucky ones down at the river won't know what they are missing. We three men sit and consume slice after slice. Only after we have finished the monster off do we drive down to the beach, bursting with secret pleasure.

John Morrison is a handsome man, younger than Mum and Dad.

He wears his shiny hair brushed back. He is the bachelor brother of Jessie Harris, our friend. Now that he and Dad and I have feasted together on melon, we are friends.



It is another hot day in Leeton. The Harris and Goldenberg families gather at the Hay Canal. As usual, we are going to sail Dad and Jack's little yacht on the swift waters of the canal. The boat is a Vaucluse Junior, also called a 'VJ'. Dad built it with his own hands.

I know about this canal; I have watched Dad aquaplaning on it, and we have all sailed here, often. Every time we come here, Dad says, 'This canal flows for ninety miles, all the way to Hay.' It sounds like a warning.

I have swum here too, swimming my few frantic strokes, always within grabbing distance of the bank, aware of the strong current that would overcome a body and carry it downstream, all the way to Hay.

Mum and I stand on the bank and watch the VJ as it tacks up and down the canal. Dad, my older brother, Dennis, and John are aboard. Dad gives Dennis a go at the tiller. Dennis is eight years old and good at steering. After a while, the bow runs between the grasses on the opposite bank and the boat is caught in the shallows. John steps up from the cockpit onto the foredeck to push off into the stream. He grips the steel forestay to steady himself, and pushes the bank with one foot. As he steps forward, the little boat lifts and sways, its mast strikes the powerlines above and John falls, falls without a cry into the water.

Now Dad and Dennis are alone in the boat, and the boat is moving backwards in the current. Dad half rises, leans over the gunwhale and, peering into the water, makes to dive. He then looks behind him at Dennis in the cockpit, and sits down again. Trapped between the current and the deep, Dad points and shouts, shouts with a mighty voice, a roar from Wamoon to Leeton.

There are answering shouts from the bank ... adult faces gaze anxiously towards the yacht ... adult feet pound along the bank in our direction ... Jack Harris is running, racing towards us. Jack, a giant of a man, is running, running with his big tummy and in bare feet. I've never seen Jack run before.

I turn to Mum. 'Why is Mister Harris running? Why is he diving into the water like that? Why is he swimming underwater? Why doesn't he come up?'

Mum has her back to me. She is looking at the water. When she answers she hasn't turned. Her voice comes from a distance: 'Jack is worried ...'

Mum breaks off as Jack surfaces and gasps: 'I had him, I had his hand!' Then Jack dives again and Dad is suddenly there, and he dives too.

Moments later, Dad and Jack are pulling a white body from the water onto the bank near us. More shouting: 'Get the truck, quick!'

As Mum leads me swiftly away from the men, I see Dad bending over the body, performing the elaborate rituals of artificial respiration, semaphoring John's limp limbs to drain the water from his chest and to suck air into him.

In no time Jack's truck arrives, Jack and Dad lift John onto the tray, then Dad resumes his work as Jack leaps behind the wheel and the truck surges and roars past us, racing along the track and over the bridge before turning towards Leeton and the hospital. Dad bends and continues the forlorn ballet of resuscitating John, aboard the bucking tray of the speeding truck.

That evening, Mum says, 'They've put John into the iron lung to make him breathe.'

Later we are at the table eating tea, when Dad comes home. He says, 'John has died. The iron lung didn't save him.'

He was electrocuted. Electricity from the powerlines ran down the metal stay that he was holding and through his body, and into the earth where he rested his foot.

Dad sits down heavily. After a while he says, ‘Dennis darling, it wasn’t your fault. It was an accident. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. We never thought ... I couldn’t save him ...’ He stops speaking and nobody says anything.

Dad and Jack sell the VJ and we never again go sailing on the canal.

My father the sailor

It is night. The boat rises and falls on the swell as we load it in the darkness. The light at the end of the jetty shines on the black water that rises towards a small boy and subsides, mesmerising him. The boy is prone to periods of ‘absence’. The father says he is a dreamer. Oil droplets on the water are like rainbows on the face of the deep. The jetty light shines upon the white decks of the boat, and beyond this brilliance the night seems darker and the water blacker.

Dad’s voice calls and the boy that was me says, ‘OK,’ and resumes loading. Pillows, sleeping bags, boxes of canned food, jerrycans of petrol, cakes baked by Mum, cheese, bread, and navigation charts – all are taken below into the cabin. We also bring aboard the things we wear when saying our prayers – *tallith* and *tefillin* – as well as Dad’s medical bag. Everything is stowed in the cabin where we four children will sleep while Dad steers the boat to the far end of Port Phillip Bay.

Inside the cabin a thin light is cast by a small overhead globe. We use this light sparingly. You are not supposed to run the light for too long in case you flatten the boat’s batteries.

We stow everything that will fit in lockers. Bigger items are wedged firmly against each other on the floor. Dad wants everything shipshape before we set out for Queenscliff. Things are shipshape when they won’t fall or spill or break or crash when our boat gets thrown around in the sea.

We get into our sleeping bags and lie down on our bunks – all

four of us children, and Dad too. He will sleep until midnight then awaken to cast off and navigate through the dark, all the way to Queenscliff. Dad prefers to go by night, to find his way by chart and compass, and by navigational markers like the South Channel Light.

Dad is a real seaman. He stands alone in the dark on the afterdeck while we sleep below. He never wears a lifejacket. What would happen if Dad were to fall off the back of the boat while it is under way and we are sleeping below? Who knows? None of us has considered this eventuality, which would seem to us children as improbable as a mermaid taking the wheel.

The water laps its lullaby against the timbers of the boat; I turn onto my side on a bunk that is so narrow, you couldn't have a decent erection. I say my prayers, warm up my sleeping bag with a few sweet farts, then fall fast asleep.

A roar followed by a throbbing batters against the walls of my dreams as Dad casts off and the motor powers the boat away from the jetty towards the open sea. Here the swell is larger and the boat climbs and slides its way southwards while I try to stay asleep.

I don't want to wake up in case Dad presses me into service on deck. It can be fun steering the boat and trying to keep it on course, but not when it's dark and cold and wet up on deck. When the wind howls and the boat rocks I want to be in my bag on a bunk while Dad keeps watch above.

The Bay is treacherous. Conditions can change abruptly, and often do so. A silent passage across a millpond can erupt into a heaving, foaming, tossing plunge through air and water. Dad says Port Phillip is as dangerous a stretch of water of its size as any in the world.

What is more, ours is a motor boat. It has only one motor, a Chrysler Marine engine which often breaks down. There is no auxiliary mast for sails. We don't have a two-way radio aboard, so if the engine conks out, you can't call for kerbside help. There is only Dad to fix it.

Sometimes the engine fails and the weather turns nasty at the

same time. At these times I see my father's face looking serious and determined. I realise that Dad is all that stands between us and some terrible event. His face is grim.

These are the times when I wish my Dad were not so able and self-reliant. And a person who is a bit of a dreamer by day might prefer it if he were dreaming on his bunk below decks, now. Without warning, my sleep is interrupted for a second time; a change has taken place. The motor, a huge inboard beast which has throbbed at my side for hours, is coughing and firing by turns. Cough, cough, cough. Then silence. Have we arrived? I sit up and look out through the window. I see in the light of early morning – not Queenscliff, but sea – an endless, lumpy sea of leaden green, upon which small white tops are breaking at an angle to the swell. There are darkening clouds and a rising wind. This is what Dad calls dirty weather.

The boat starts to roll noisily from side to side. Things that should have been shipshape now leap and crash about. Quickly, I lie down again and close my eyes.

Dad is inside the cabin, kneeling on the floor and removing the heavy wooden casing that houses the engine. He pulls a piece of greasy tubing free of its attachment to some more tubing, then sucks hard. Somehow he avoids getting a mouthful of the petrol that flows in response to his sucking. He restores the tube to its attachment and goes aft where he turns a key. The starter motor shrieks inside the cabin, then groans and subsides. Nothing happens. Dad tries again and again. The whinnying and groaning inside a rolling cabin which now smells richly of spilled fuel, are not pleasant.

In my bunk I concentrate on the sounds that I hear. Repeatedly, Dad tries to start the motor. The screams lengthen as Dad holds the key turned, but that half groan follows, then that ugly silence falls. I hold my breath.

Another turn of the starter motor, another non-start of the engine, then a new sound – Dad is using Strong Language: 'Damn and Blast!' Another try, a further failure, an intensifying of the language

of a mechanic who is at sea: 'YOU BITCH!'

Once again Dad is inside the cabin, kneeling and sucking. The boat rolls harder. It rolls over so far that it must capsize, then it steadies and rolls back, and Dad's knees lose their purchase on the floorboards. He lurches and his head smacks against the hard metal of the Chrysler Marine engine. 'You bitch!' says Dad again, and pays no attention to his cut forehead which starts to bleed. He takes another suck, petrol flows up the tube and into his mouth. He spits, then vomits into the bilge. He gets up and moves quickly aft, where he turns the key. The starter motor produces a sustained, battery-draining cry of agony, the motor roars an enraged response, Dad shifts the gear lever and the boat surges forward. Dad leans on the tiller and we turn south again and head for Queenscliff.

I decide not to stay inside with the petrol fumes and the open bilge that surges with Dad's thin vomit. I find a bandaid and move aft.

'Do you want me to steer Dad?'



Another trip. We are singing. All of us kids are up on deck with Dad in the brilliant sunshine, holding on hard as the boat rides the waves.

A capital ship for an ocean trip
Was the *Walloping Window Blind*.
No wind that blew dismayed her crew
Or troubled the captain's mind.

We sing at the top of our voices, trying to hear ourselves over the roar of the engine which is also in pretty good voice this morning. We are heading for open water where we will drift for flathead. Flathead are deservedly known as the most stupid of God's creatures: any fool can catch them (which explains my success) but the success feels empty. They are only good eating if you like bones. And once you have

caught one, you have to remove the flathead from the hook. During this process the fish shows its ingratitude towards you by thrashing about, frequently impaling your finger on one of its numerous barbs. Now it is your turn to thrash about in pain, until Dad says, 'Rub your finger in the mucus on a flathead's belly.' This suggestion has as much appeal as poking your finger up the nose of a stranger who has a bad cold, but it does stop the pain.

We are singing the chorus as the boat rides and plunges over the oncoming sea, casting a drenching spray over anyone sheltering aft in the cockpit.

Then blow ye winds, heigh-ho
A-roving we will go
I'm off to my wife
With the carving knife
Ten thousand miles away.

Mum is lying down below in the cabin, reading. This is a weakness and a folly in Dad's eyes. For Dad, action is virtue – whether at work or on holiday. For Mum, a cabin empty of her five jolly sailor boys and a good book are bliss.

Dad knows how to overcome bliss. He cajoles Mum to come up on deck: 'You'll enjoy the sunshine, Yvonne.' Mum complies, the boat leaps and smacks into an oncoming wave and Mum gets drenched as she emerges from the cabin. Having enjoyed the sunshine Mum goes inside and dries off and resumes reading.

Dad cuts the motor. We begin to drift for flathead, the boat goes side-on to the waves and begins to roll. The sun goes behind a cloud, the wind whips my nipples and I retire below, shunning virtue for a good book.

Almost immediately, there is a slapping on the deck above my head. Dad has landed a flathead, a big one by the sound of him, doing its death dance and summoning the hunter below. Moments later Margot – she is one of us jolly sailor boys – and Dennis and

Barry are landing flathead too. But the hunter below is in the jungles of Africa, where a lion has crept downwind of Tarzan and has sprung towards him as he bends forward to drink from a stream.

Up on deck, the wind is doing its mischief with the fishing lines. Tangles are developing. The death dance of many fishes becomes a corroboree. Everywhere, fish flail about on deck, tangling further those fine filaments of line.

‘Mum! Mum! Can you come and help me with my tangle?’ The cry from the throat of one or more of her children penetrates Mum’s reverie. Here comes the wife with the carving knife, says she, as she makes the deck and sits down for a labour which will not end until we return to port.

‘Come and fish, Howard, the flathead are on the bite!’

But Dad’s summons goes unheard. Tarzan and the lion are wrestling in a life and death struggle.

Somehow, some time, the motor starts, the boat is under way, and Mum has come inside to avoid the dampening effects of sunshine. Tarzan has a half-nelson on the lion and is engaged in a mighty effort of muscle to break the beast’s neck.

There is singing overhead:

And the cook was Dutch
And behaved as such ...

The magnificent muscles at the back of Tarzan’s neck are bunched and contracted. He forces the lion’s neck further forward with his laced fingers. A breathless moment, a snapping sound is heard, and the great creature falls dead at Tarzan’s feet.

The motor has stopped and somehow the boat has not begun to roll. I go up on deck and discover that we have tied up in Pope’s Eye, one of the loveliest spots on Port Phillip Bay. According to Dad, The Pope’s Eye is an annulus, an incomplete circle of rocks which face The Rip. There used to be cannon mounted here, aimed towards the entrance to the Bay, where the invading Russians would have to pass

on their way to Melbourne. If only Melbourne were to fall, the Russian Bear would have a strategic stranglehold upon the world: Minsk, Pinsk and Moonee Ponds tightening an irresistible pincer grip on the world's arteries.

In the event, we scared the Russians away and took down the guns. A century too soon, in my opinion, as we face the Russians once again, in Berlin and in Budapest, and fear them everywhere.

We have tied up in the annulus, not for its scenic beauty but for its shallow depth and its shelter. The engine is overheating and will soon seize up unless Dad can fix it.

Dad reckons there must be something choking the water inlet which sucks sea water into the boat to cool the motor. Dad is holding onto the rail and leaning over the side, peering at the inlet. But he can't get a good view because the inlet is below the water line.

Dad calls for help. 'Who wants to dive over the side and unblock the intake?' I do. That is, I think I do – until I contemplate our proximity to the open ocean, to Tasmania and, beyond that, to Antarctica.

In my moment of irresolution Dennis helps me by pushing me firmly in the small of my back. I descend, swim under water to the hole in the hull, and find a plastic bag blocking the intake. I yank it out and surface to a hero's welcome. Dad starts the motor and it's:

Blow ye winds yo ho
A roving we do go
And Dennis will pay
Yes he will pay
He'll rue this day
I'll have my way ...

Dennis doesn't have to wait long. At bedtime he finds a cold, dead flathead awaiting him in the bottom of his sleeping bag. Treading on a flathead is like putting your toes up someone's runny nose. And there's always the chance of a nasty sting.



There are all sorts of songs you can sing in a boat. With the boat speeding across the water, and the four of us kids up on deck with Dad, and the wake all white in parallel lines behind us, and the morning sun brilliant on the water and thawing our cold-tight skin, you sing for warmth and you sing for joy and beauty and for being together. Sea songs are called sea shanties. Dad says it comes from the French word for singing. Like the great arias of opera, ours are all songs of love and death.

Our boat is old and unreliable and unfashionable. But it's big and comfortable and it sleeps six on its narrow bunks. There is a big table and a small and smelly toilet. You go into that toilet and stand there and watch the sea water rising and falling in the bowl with the motion of the boat. It can distract you from the business at hand and from your aim. Sometimes you go in and have to sit down, and the boat moves up and down and you have visions of the cold sea rising in the bowl and kissing your warm bottom.

We are the only Jewish family among the families that gather with our boats each year in Queenscliff, but we feel at home here. Dad has been coming here since he was a little boy. He grew up with the kids of the fishing families, and his father – my Papa – used to fish with the professionals here. Dad is proud of his father's skill. He says the fishermen liked to take Papa fishing with them because he'd increase their catch.

The fishing families around here don't find our Jewishness strange; they've known us now for three generations and we are comfortable together. Olga and Roy have known Dad and his brothers all their lives. They come and eat a meal with us on board our boat. Roy sits at our big table and picks up his fried flathead in his short fingers. Some of his fingers are missing, and he doesn't use a knife and fork. I watch, fascinated. Did a great fish take those fingers?

We meet old Alby who tells us about the times he's been ship-

wrecked. He's seventy and he's never learned to swim. He just hung on to some floating timber from his wrecked shark boat until someone came and rescued him. It was two days and a night before they found him. He tells us this and just laughs, his great pink face all burned and scarred by seventy years of sun and sea. You would not know, from his face of smiles, of the people he has known and lost.

Maureen is Alby's daughter. She is Mum's age, and she has a red-headed daughter but no husband. Nobody talks about this; did he drown in a shipwreck? Maureen and Little Red live with Alby and Maureen's brother, Murray, who looks after them. Murray and another fisherman are going to take us out floundering when the moon and the tide are right, but when the night comes with the right tide and the right moon, we don't go because (as Dad explains) the fisherman is very tired. So are we all – we have waited up past midnight. So we go to bed. In the morning we learn that the fisherman had been in the hotel all the afternoon and all the evening and had become so tired he couldn't stand up straight.

Most of the people at the yacht club drink a lot of beer. Dad doesn't drink much but people make allowances because he is a doctor, which is different. Is it because Dad is a doctor that people at the club don't mind us being Jewish? The Greek man on the boat at the far end of the jetty is short and round, and he smokes a cigar and laughs a laugh that is fathoms deep. His boat, like ours, is old and unfashionable. Although he is a man, he likes to cook and you can smell the garlic and the olive oil when he is cooking. He is not a doctor, and he is rather Greek, so the yacht club is glad that he keeps his boat and his smells at the far end.

We are not the only people at the club who sing. In the long evenings, as we lie on our bunks and the other boat people keep on drinking, we hear the adults singing loudly. They sing and they laugh and their voices are loud across the water. If you look through the portholes you can see their faces, red in the lamplight. Sometimes you hear water splashing on water, and you see one of the men

holding onto a bollard and peeing from the jetty. You fall asleep to the sounds of their laughing and singing.

As well as our large motor boat we have a sailing dinghy. Dad teaches us to sail it. He shows us how to hoist the sail, how to turn the boat without tipping it over and how to get the boat back upright if it does tip over. He knows all these things. He teaches us how to have fun on the water and to be safe.

Because you can die on the water. Dad never forgets John Morrison, handsome John, dying young on the water. It was another boat in another time.

We sail and we have fun and Dad makes sure we are safe. He doesn't say anything about John Morrison or the little boat on the Hay Canal. But he's very fussy about safety.

When the day has died Dad sings a lullaby:

Sweet and low, sweet and low
Wind of the western sea,
Low low, breathe and blow
While my little ones,
While my pretty ones sleep.



'Howard – grab a lifejacket and come up on deck – quickly!'

I have been lying on my bunk, reading, hoping to stay below decks and read out the storm. Dad and I have long agreed that I am an idiot. He points it out whenever I carry out any practical task. He tells me how to do the task before I do it, then while I'm doing it, then after I finish.

Dad knows the only right way and I create a variety of wrong ways. Dad points out these errors as consistently as I make them.

A rough passage from Portarlinton to Queenscliff calls for a non-idiot, a practical person, not to mention a brave one. And Dad is very brave. With Dad up on deck a storm feels manageable, just another

fight against the elements. The boat can leap and crash and roll; Dad can hold his own.

If Dad needs help, there are likelier candidates. I have an older brother – but he’s away at camp – and I have an older mother, if it comes to that. But Mum suffers from being a woman, so she isn’t logical. I know about women and logic because I hear Dad telling Mum, quite frequently.

So this summons to the arena of heroes is unusual. I do not relish this new opportunity to be an idiot. I put on a lifejacket and a brave face – brave but not, I hope, heroic.

Up on deck I discover that this is not a storm; this is something different. The wind screams. Dad shouts something but the wind snatches his voice away. I come closer, bracing by hand and foot, and Dad’s mouth is in my ear as the boat convulses in the tortured sea.

‘Howard, I need you to go up forrard. Tell me if you see land and where you see it. You’ll have to hold on tight. And put on a waterproof – it’s going to be wet.’

I look up. Ahead of the boat there is no sky. There is no sea either. The wind is whipping everything into a white foam. The world is bleached and wild and very beautiful.

Dad said he needs me up forrard: *me!*

Down below again, I decide to take off everything except my bathing togs and the lifejacket. I put a waterproof on over the jacket and go back on deck, where a fusillade of horizontal rain stings my eyes.

More ear-to-mouth megaphone: ‘Howard – we have to keep away from the shore. We’re about to pass the Point George Light and then we want to go in a straight line towards the West Channel Light. If we go inshore of that line we could hit Governor’s Reef. This squall is blowing us towards the land across the reef. I need you to keep a lookout; tell me when you see the Point George Light. It should come up soon.

‘And Howard – one more thing: there is a second light which

flashes every 6.75 seconds – when you see that white light you know we’ve got plenty of depth – we’re in safe water. But if you see the light flashing red, we’re too far inshore. We might be near the reef.’

I inch my way forward. My bare feet are bathed in turn by the warm water of the waves that crash over the bow, and the colder water of the rain that pelts still, smiting me from top to toe. The boat is drunk, a maniac that tries to hurl me overboard as it thrashes against the seas. Abruptly the engine falls quieter and the boat ceases its leaping. Dad has throttled back to allow me an easier passage along the deck to the bow.

I turn and wave, screaming, ‘Thanks, Dad!’

Dad said the light I want flashes white. I scan the waters in front of me for a white light. But everything is white – the rain and the foam and the seas ahead. The white dances against the near-white and the grey-white, but no light flashes.

Gripping the stout front rail I lean forward, peering for a glimpse of the signal of safety or of danger. Dad has revved the engine again to make sure we do not lose steerage way. As we leap and dive through the waves I begin to wonder how strong is the *Margot Carolin*. Dad says she’s strong enough for anything that Port Phillip can throw at her. And I know she won’t sink because she’s built of wood and Dad says wood is lighter than water. That’s good because there’s water everywhere; it’s up to my knees now, then suddenly it has gone as the bow rides high over an engulfing wave.

But no boat is safe if it crashes onto rocks, and Governor’s Reef is a line of rocks just below the waterline. Unseen, they wait for craft that come their way, then gouge their bottoms like waiting sharks. They eat wooden boats like ours for breakfast. I know because Dad told me.

I am up forrard and Dad is a few feet away at the wheel. Everyone else is below. Dad steers and runs the engine and I keep a look out across the water with eyes that fill and sting with the waters of the squall. We are the only two people in the world. We are the two people who are keeping the others safe.

Something black and big is in the water, just ahead and to starboard. I yell and wave and point at the huge black form. As I hold on and pivot and look towards Dad, a wave washes my feet from beneath me and I land on my bum on the deck. But I am still holding on, holding on and looking towards Dad. And Dad is waving back and nodding and flashing me a grin.

I look up at the black thing and see a flash of white from the light at its top. We are passing the Point George Light, surging past, passing from safety towards the Governor's Reef.

I look ahead into the white for a white light. I look anxiously to starboard for sight of white sand. I look at the walls of white and the falling showers of white and the rain pellets of white in a world that dances about me. The deck that dances beneath my feet is painted white. I turn and look at Dad. His navy beanie is a black mush. Mine must look the same. In a world of white and wet, only Dad and I have form and colour.

The only sounds are the crash and splash of water, the howl of wind from the end of the world; and behind these, the baritone drone of a marine engine. The howling world is empty of speech. I move and brace, ducking waves as they break over us to stay upright, Dad sways as he steers and peers below at his instruments and above at the whiteness. We are in a dream, serene in a world of mime, a ballet. My Dad and I are two mortals alone, struggling on an epileptic sea. One captain, one deckhand – no idiots.

It is a time which has no measure. It comes to an end when suddenly the white lifts, the wind drops, the sun – unruly old fool – bursts in upon our intimacy. The squall has come and it has passed. There, far away to starboard, is the creamy yellow of St Leonards sandy beach. And here, straight ahead, is the West Channel Light. It flashes at me every 6.75 seconds, flashing white, winking and saying welcome, well done, you are safe. You two have brought your family safe and sound, far from the Governor's Reef.

I turn to Dad and point at the light. He smiles. His voice is a new sound in a new world: 'Thank you, Howard. Well done.'

The helmsman

There is an unfamiliar boat moored at the yacht club jetty. Large and elegant, it has white decks that gleam in the summer sunshine. It floats gracefully on the slow swell as the sun dances over the water. The boat is one with the water and the melting sky. It is a seabird with white wings. It moves languidly, a hovering pelican.

The beautiful boat draws us close. Tommy, my schoolmate, and I sit on the edge of the jetty, our legs dangling over the side. Half a metre away, the boat rises and falls with the rhythm of the sea.

'Don't hang your legs over the jetty!'

The voice has an edge, urgent, absolute. The voice is Dad's, the voice of command, of commandment, of *thou shalt not*. Wondering, I look up over my shoulder at my father.

'The swell can lift the boat sideways without warning, and swing it hard and crush your legs against the jetty and break your bones. It happened to Uncle Phil when he was boy. I've told you before, Howard – don't you remember?'

I don't remember, not exactly. I thought it was Dad whose legs were broken when they were boys. My legs are up under my chin. In place of a white bird there is only a hard object, not to be trusted.

This is my seventeenth summer. At seventeen a person is expected to be serious. Not a clown. After these holidays I will be a matriculation student, studying for my future. If I am good enough I will enter medical school.

Here in Queenscliff Dad drives our boat with great care. The tide rips through the fishermen's creek, surging and flinging our boat at its will and sudden whim, towards shifting sandbanks and unforgiving objects. As he steers, Dad's face is tense. I watch him at the wheel and

I recall those humiliating times we had to ask the fishermen to tow us off the sandbank; and that frightening time we smashed sideways against the steel uprights of the fishermen's wharf. There was a sickening crunch as the *Margot Carolin's* ribs fractured.

Through the years I watch Dad, a man struggling with the sea, doing a man's work. This is no job for clowns.

'Howard, do you want to take the wheel?'

After a day's fishing in open waters, we are entering the fishermen's creek at Queenscliff, and today, instead of driving down the creek and turning out of its riptide towards the quiet waters of the yacht club, we will tie up in the creek itself – at the fishermen's wharf.

I consider the creek. The tide is favourable: it is ebbing slowly. Its outflowing waters will oppose our progress and slow us, nature's brake for the clumsy flotsam that is a man-made craft.

Do I want to take the wheel? I know I can do it. I've done it lots of times – when Dad has been back in Melbourne. But Dad is here now. He will be watching and I will be nervous.

Again Dad invites me while the slackening tide winks at me, saying, 'Come on, Howard, take over.' Of course I do not trust the sea. She is a false friend.

I am at the wheel and the *Margot Carolin* glides sweetly down the midstream. There is a high collar of water riding at the throat of our boat, thrown up by the outgoing tide. I see it and register its silent opposition.

'Don't forget the tide, Howard. There's still a slow ebb. It will act as a brake.'

Here, in the narrow part of the creek, the air is still and we are protected from cross-breezes, but ahead of us I see ripples racing across the open water where we will make our turn before the approach. I see the ripples and take note.

'There'll be a breeze up ahead, Howard.'

Ahead of us and to starboard is the sandbank. When you hit the bank, the boat comes to a dead stop while everything and everyone

aboard persists in its state of motion in obedience to Isaac Newton's Laws. A loud clatter of cups, kettles, pots, books and binoculars announces the helmsman's error, and our bruising confirms it. Then the boat leans drunkenly upon its side, a declaration of incompetence, this time quite public.

I remember that bank well, and I keep it in mind. Dad is on the foredeck preparing a mooring line. Tommy is below in the cockpit, safely out of the way of the action. Tommy is a clown. He says he doesn't know his forrard from his forehead or his aft from his arse. Lucky Tommy.

As we approach the wharf, a fisherman pulls out into the creek ahead of us. 'Go out wide to give him room, Howard, then swing in and come alongside.'

I swing the boat out wide, keeping a weather eye out to starboard for the sandbank.

'Watch the sandbank, Howard.'

I throw her out of gear to slow us for a cautious approach to the wharf, then swing the wheel to port.

'Throw her out of gear, Howard.'

As the boat loses headway a gust of crosswind blows us sideways and backwards towards the steel uprights of the wharf. I swing the wheel harder to port but the drifting boat doesn't respond to the helm. Now the tide, eddying strongly around the piles, seizes the *Margot Carolin* and pulls her hard backwards towards a large, rusty scallop boat astern of us.

It is time for some power to give us steerage way. I race the motor and slam the boat into gear.

'Throw it into gear Howard.'

The boat surges forward, away from the ugly rust bucket behind us. Meanwhile she turns hard to port in eager response to the wheel. Dad is shouting something but the motor drowns his voice. The wharf is only metres ahead of our bow and closing fast. We have no brakes. I throw the engine into reverse and rev it higher. The engine

screams, the boat's forward motion slows, but too slowly. We slam hard into the steel uprights, I slow the motor and we slide penitently backwards, then I cut the motor and we stop.

Now Dad's voice is audible, clearly audible. You could hear him in Geelong. 'Howard! *What the blazes were you doing?* Why did you turn towards the wharf?'

I am quietly tying a bowline to the bollard on the wharf. I don't answer Dad because I don't have an answer.

'Why did you race the engine like that? *What made you speed up in close waters?*'

I am busily securing a stern line. 'I don't know Dad.'

'WHAT?'

'I don't know.'

I am on the wharf now, throwing an extra hitch around the bollard. Eyes stinging, I straighten and turn from the boat and walk away. There is silence for a moment and when Dad's voice reaches me again, it is gentler.

'Where are you going, Howard?'

'For a walk.'

Where am I going? It is a good question. I don't really know. I reach the end of the wharf and walk behind Cayzer's boat shed and out of sight of Tommy and Dad. There are dunes nearby and I throw myself into one of the sandy bunkers between them and settle down for a good sulk.

Afterwards, I sit and imagine the conversation between Tommy and Dad. They are sitting up on the foredeck. Dad's voice is explaining something: 'No, Tommy, I'm not angry at Howard. I am frightened for him. I want him to be safe on the water. I wanted to teach him boatmanship. Instead, I ...'

Tommy's voice would be diffident, formal, puzzled: 'Dr Goldenberg, what is there to be so frightened about?'

'Everything, Tommy. Everything is dangerous. I've lost a young man from my own boat. He drowned after a trivial mishap. I've seen

the bodies of people who drowned as they fished from the rocks; I've seen legs broken – it happened to my own brother. I was sitting at his side, and a boat crushed his legs. His legs were crushed and the boat missed mine.

'I've removed dozens of fish hooks from fingers; have you ever seen that done? The hook is caught in the living flesh. You can't pull it out the way it went in. You have to push the hook deeper into the finger and force it through the skin until it comes out on the other side. Grown men sometimes faint when I do it to them ...

'I've seen swimmers gashed by outboard motors, I've seen sunburn that scarred a beautiful girl's face, I've seen older people unconscious from heatstroke; and men stung by poisonous fish barbs, weeping with the pain. I've seen so much. Some people see it and don't take it to heart. These fishermen here, I've known some of them since we all were boys together. Many of them have lost family at sea. Old Alby Johnstone lost a cousin, and he himself has been wrecked twice. His boat went down off King Island and he couldn't swim, didn't have a life jacket. He hung on to floating spars until he was rescued. Then he went out to sea again, still unable to swim, still no life jacket ...'

A pause. Then Dad's voice again: 'I'm not like them. I do worry. Perhaps it's through being a doctor – I've seen too much – I can't relax. I am always anxious ... My father didn't know the meaning of fear. Maybe I am more like my mother, timid ...'

Night is falling. They don't see me as I enter the boat from the stern, but the gentle rocking of the boat as I climb aboard will tell Dad that his son is back.

And safe.

Life of brine

The letter lies discarded. Dad's glasses lie near it and a heavy silence hangs in my parents' lounge room. Neither Mum nor Dad has noticed my entry. Dad sits with his head in his hands. At length he

removes his hands and says, 'He might have drowned ...'

As I walk into the room and deliver a booming hello, the mood shifts subtly. I recognise the discarded letter. I know its contents. 'May I read it, folks?'

Silence, then Mum says faintly, 'Of course, darling.' I pick it up and read aloud:

Metung.

Dear Mum and Dad,

Real men don't eat quiche and real sailors don't wear life jackets. When this real yachtsman falls over the side of our Catalina 27 in a twenty-knot following breeze, he is not wearing a life jacket. As he falls head first from the speeding yacht, his first thought is of his own absurdity. Here he is, falling from a boat for the first time in his fifty years on boats. He is the only person aboard with any sailing experience, but suddenly, he is not aboard at all. His posture is inelegant, his body language frantic.

At the helm is Lionel. Aloft is all the sail we can carry, and we are shooting and surfing over a following sea on our way back to Metung. Lionel has never been taught how to tack, nor how to lower sail. No one on board knows how to operate the ship-to-shore radio.

As he falls through the air, our sailor grabs for the painter that tows the yacht's dinghy. But that slender rope is a slim hope and a slippery one, and it is quickly gone, leaving our sailor face downward in the sea, drinking salty water. He surfaces with another thought: grab the dinghy and climb into it; from there it's a simple matter to regain the yacht.

The thought process is swift but so is the dinghy. A frantic clutch backwards at the dinghy's gunwhale, a slither of wet hand on slippery rubber – and the little boat has made its light escape into the beautiful.

Our sailor now has ample opportunity to regard the receding yacht in its full suit of sail. How graceful, how impressive, how rapid! At the back of the yacht he can see the four lifebuoys which are supplied for such an emergency; between them are the faces of Lionel's three children as they gaze backward at him. Is that a worried look they wear? He recalls his mother's rhyme:

No matter how young a prune may be
He's always full of wrinkles.
We may get them on our face;
Prunes get 'em every place.
Nothing ever worries them,
Their life's an open book,
But no matter how young a prune may be,
He wears a worried look!

So does our sailor, because – warm weather and cloudless skies notwithstanding – he is an indifferent swimmer, these are biggish seas and no one throws him a lifebuoy. He would rather like to have one, so he raises his salt-choked voice and bellows his request. The playful wind carries his cry and drowns it in its roaring and in the humming of the stays and the crashing of the waves. The worried faces of the children are getting smaller.

One of the waves now catches him unawares and gives him another long drink. He surfaces and grabs at his hat which the sea is trying to steal from him. But he is not left naked; he still wears his green and gold Australian Olympic running shorts, an American rugby shirt in stars and stripes, and his purple running tights from the Boston Marathon. He does not customarily swim so heavily attired, but he is grateful now for all that colour; searchers will find it easy to spot him.

(Are these worried looks I see in my parents' lounge room? Can't they see the funny side? I go on reading.)

The sailor begins to swim after the yacht, but a Catalina 27 is faster than he. Suddenly the yacht changes course. In a great flapping of sails it stalls, and the sailor, greatly encouraged, swims hard for the boat which drifts and beckons only 150 metres away. He puts his head down and drives his arms and legs through the waves. After a minute of hard swimming, he looks up, measures the distance remaining, and finds it has increased to 200 metres. This is not encouraging. While Lionel tries repeatedly to drive a boat under sail directly into the breeze, the sailor swims ever harder down the wind, trying to narrow the gap, but still the gap widens as the breaking seas and the lifting breeze blow the crew further and further from their captain.

It is a tiring captain who now gives up the chase and measures instead the distance to shore. From the top of a riding wave he gazes towards Raymond Island. From this distance he can make out no detail of its tree-lined shore, no breaking wave. He knows that the trees and the waves are there to be seen, but he is too far away to discern them. Bad news.

The sailor lies now on his back, floating, resting himself while he takes a moment to deliberate. But a breaking wave ambushes him from behind, breaks over his face, fills his nostrils and ends that plan. There is no rest.

How long will it take him to swim to Raymond Island? An hour? After this morning's vigorous run on the Ninety Mile Beach, he swam in its surf, then spent four hours sailing in heavy weather. He is knackered. Can he swim for a whole hour? Can he even stay afloat for that long?

(Dad raises his head. His muttered words are a stifled scream: ‘Swimming off that beach? In those rips? You had no right ...’ The pain in Dad’s voice is sobering. My levity seems only to deepen his gravity. I read on, treading more gently ...)

Until now, the sailor’s breast has been filled with alarm. And salty water. Now real fear starts to take over. He knows that these waters have claimed the lives of better sailors than he. It is time not to panic; time to stop swimming and to start thinking.

I am squandering energy with all this swimming. It’s not getting me anywhere. I can’t get to the boat, they can’t get to me, and the shore is too far away ... Time to pray?

‘But the sailor’s tradition is to pray only with a covered head. He remembers that he is gripping his hat in his left hand. He could place it on his head and manoeuvre it into place, but that hand would be, for a time, unavailable for flotation, and a further salty drink would follow.

His ancestors wrote beautiful poetry when they were drowning. He thinks of King David’s line when he was in deep trouble: From the deeps I cried out unto You, oh Lord ...

Dimly he remembers Jonah. Between his time aboard the ship and his time inboard the fish, he was a man overboard like me.

In the heart of the seas,
The flood was round about me;
All Thy waves and Thy billows
Passed over me.

The sailor could do with some poetry right now – for comfort and for beauty.

(Dad snorts: ‘Poetry? You need therapy!’)

I can’t see Dad’s face. He has turned his back to me. I can see

Mum's expression, and she doesn't look her cheerful self. Why is this? Did I drown? No! Am I not here before them, hale and hearty?

I manufactured the bits about poetry. I wanted to make light of the whole episode, make it easier for them. Or was it for myself?

Writing this way, reading aloud, my words sound callous now. I stop and sit down to read on silently.)

The sailor decides to postpone prayer; he's not desperate yet. He swims slowly towards Raymond Island, swims and drinks more brine. 'For brine is the kingdom ...'

He's starting to think silly thoughts now. Not so Lionel, who has started the yacht's motor and is turning the boat about. The floating one watches with mixed pleasure and amusement the plunge and buck and swerve of a large boat under full sail, making its flapping progress upwind in his general direction.

As the yacht looms close, he wonders whether the crew will recall this morning's 'Man Overboard' drill: how to slow the boat early in the approach, how to throw the engine astern so they won't run down the man overboard.

In the event, neither occurs. As the boat approaches, the wind snatches the boom in a sudden jibe. The boom swings violently across the superstructure, thwacks hard against the stays, and the boat sails rapidly away to starboard, at ninety degrees from its course to the floating man.

So near, but too far ... Moments later, Lionel has the boat about again. Once again she heads upwind towards its quarry, the bow rising and falling on the waves. To the swimmer, the bow looks like the head of a pony, trotting under tight rein. This time the course is unerring. Now the boat slows, now the engine whinnies as Lionel throws her astern, and the boat slides slowly alongside – but not over

– its grateful captain. Lionel’s strong arm reaches down, the sailor grips it and Lionel’s fingers lock around the flesh of the sailor’s forearm. They look at each other. Neither will let go. The sea sucks at the sailor as he regards the ladder and the three steps he must climb to regain the boat.

A deep breath, a heave and he is free. Another breath as his tired arms lug his heavy body onto the steps. He and Lionel embrace.

Long after their short holiday, two images will stay with the sailor: both are of the skies over the lakes. The first is a picture of the brilliant blue and the blinding sun that he saw while lying on his back with the yacht receding. The second is the night sky over Picnic Arm where they rode at anchor, following the adventures of that day.

With the children asleep, the two friends took to the dinghy and glided silently over the black waters of the breathless lake. Above them was a display of the stars of heaven, brilliant and numberless. As the two gazed upward, they saw planets, the odd satellite and a shooting star. They heard the *plink, plink* of water droplets falling from the resting oars onto the lake. The brilliant stars bore mute witness as they spoke with unguarded candour of good and evil in the lives of humans; and they heard the soft splash of fishes jumping for gnats in the moonless night.

Love,
Howard

I look closely at Dad. Haggard, he looks at me, then through me, toward a distant horizon and a time long past. He sees a far place, and now – finally – I see it too. Together, we gaze in silence and see the body, limp and white, of a young man, lost on the Hay Canal.

Requiem

Dad and I have sailed hard all day. At sunset we tie the yacht to a big gum tree on the edge of Duck Arm and come ashore to eat. The ground here is littered with small sticks, fuel for our barbecue. Soon the barbecue is spitting sausage fat and sizzling lamb chops, and the spuds are charring in the ashes.

On this hillside beach there are only Dad and me and some shy cows chewing cud in the distance. Man and beast watch the night come down, and now we eat heartily and enjoy the pleasant sensations of restfulness and bodily fatigue.

Dad switches on his old portable radio, tuning it hopefully to 3AR. The reception is crystal. They are playing music on the ABC, something orchestral, something melodic and profound that I do not recognise.

Dad might know: 'What are they playing, Dad?'

'I don't know, darling.' Neither of us says anything more about the music. Before sounds like these, further speech would be rough cloth. It is dark and very still. We lie on our backs and listen to the music, looking up at a cloudless night sky. No moon, no human lights compete here with the stars.

Dad's voice crosses the nights of his four score years: 'I've never seen starlight so bright.' Nothing more is said, no rough cloth. We see light that has passed through time and space; we listen to music from another century, another continent.

We have pure light, pure sounds, deep contentment. We lie still, without speech, knowing that this is sacred, sensing that we will never again share a night like this. But neither will we lose it.

The music reaches its powerful climax, a consummation. The announcer says: 'That was *Requiem*, by Verdi.'