

PR35.

Exposure

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My father, Harold, should have stayed home that muggy Sunday morning two days after Christmas. Instead he followed his resolve to run away to sea. Perhaps the lingering gunpowder smell of spent Christmas bon-bons incited him. Or maybe the flatness following the unsatisfactory Christmas lunch - his mother harried (no turkey, again), his father pretending not to notice the absent turkey and his wife's agitation, his spoilt younger cousins sullen and fractious in their crowns of coloured paper. But I think it was the words that did it - *running away to sea*. He was greedy for words gulping them down like water.

He'd packed a knapsack with his marble collection, three twists of barley sugar, an extra pair of socks, two of underpants, a cap, and one of his father's handkerchiefs. His mother, Evelyn, would have insisted on socks if she'd been doing the packing. And when he'd squashed them in, he thought of her. He knew she'd be unhappy, but he hoped the exotic souvenirs he'd send her would at first console her, and then win her admiration. He left a note saying as much beneath his pillow.

Just before leaving, he'd placed both hands on the wall outside his parents' bedroom, then peered round the door. His mother was asleep on her back with her arms across her chest as if hugging herself. Keeping herself to herself, as she herself might have said. Don, his father was lying on his side with one arm hanging over the

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bed. Harold was pleased they were lying apart so he could see them both distinctly. He told himself he'd be able to remember them always looking just like that.

The sun had barely risen when he let himself out of the house. He set off at a brisk trot hoping no one he knew would be about at that hour. He doubted he'd be able to keep quiet about the adventure if he met one of his friends. Fortunately, the only person in sight was Mrs. Ollard from the end of the street, and he was not inclined to unburden himself to her. Molly Ollard was as round and soft-edged as her name, with rosy veined cheeks like fat ripe plums. When she raised her arm in greeting, the sleeve of her loose-stitch pink cardigan drooped from her plump elbow like a pennant. She didn't comment on his knapsack because from where she was standing, it was just a blur. Of course, Harold didn't know that, and was both relieved and annoyed at the omission. So he smiled and said, 'Hullo, Mrs. Ollard, as though he was out on an ordinary walk. He even went so far as to lean against her fence, drawing attention to himself like a felon establishing an alibi. Part of him wanted to say, 'I'm running away to sea,' just to see her mouth open in an O of wonderment and admiration.

He walked the length of Balaclava Road following the glinting tram tracks down to Luna Park, then on to St Kilda Beach. Once there, he threw himself down on the sand to rest. He intended to walk along the shore around to Port Melbourne, then smuggle himself on to a ship.

The beach was empty apart from a man and a small boy. The boy carried a blue and green bucket. Every so often, he bent down to pick up a shell. Before putting the shell in the bucket he held it out for the man to admire. Each time the man gazed down at the boy, Harold looked away. What he was feeling was bereavement, though he didn't know the word yet. He placed his knapsack between his feet, and stared at the sea. The

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waves breaking softly on the shore made him think of frothy milk lapped from a giant saucer by a large slow cat. Yet out to sea, the water looked cold and dark and deep. Harold wondered if it was as deep as twenty thousand leagues. He himself had never been in water past his waist.

A cold wind sprang up, stinging Harold's eyes and blowing unwanted thoughts into his head. He glanced back the way he'd come. The palm trees along the esplanade were huddled together like giant skulking spiders. Heavy clouds massed in the grey sky. Harold hunched his shoulders, picked up the knapsack, and walked on. He was imagining himself as Jonah flung from his ship, water pouring into his shouting mouth, his arms and legs lashing weakly against an icy swell. He'd never believed that part about the whale. Yet he knew that the sea swallowed people - usually fishermen, but sometimes sailors. The sea tore the clothes from their bodies, then spat them up on the shore, bare, bloated, and stinking like dead fish.

He felt a hot wash of shame at the thought of being seen in such a state by strangers. Himself exposed. His mother had used the phrase 'exposed himself' when she'd warned him about the old man in the park. The formality of these words in his mother's mouth had surprised, then embarrassed him. He looked down at his thin small body. Small consolation he'd be unaware of the humiliation of exposure. He'd overheard talk at home about Uncle Jim who was buried at sea. He'd been a sailor - not like those in books with gold earrings, colourful wide breeches, and gleaming cutlasses - but the modern sort in an old jacket smelling of tobacco and beer. A rough diamond, the family had called him. Diamonds were as solid as steel. Yet this uncle's ashes had been flung into wild waves to dissolve like sugar in tea.

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He transferred the knapsack to his other shoulder, and ran fast along the hard banked sand of the shore. Rounding a point along the bay, he stopped short. Dark seaweed lay in mounds along the water's edge like some alien breed of squat brown sheep. The mounds smelled rank like stale vase water. He pounded his way through them to show contempt, loathing their give, their slippery bulk. He stopped just once, and kicked at a large clump dislodging a crab. The crab was missing a front pincer. It scuttled away, and disappeared under a rock.

He ran until he was in sight of the docks, then sat down to wait for the day to pass. He wasn't exactly hungry - the seaweed smell was still making him sick - but he was empty, and very cold. He was tired too. Thinking about the coming adventure had kept him awake most of last night. He untied the knapsack, and took out his cap and the pair of socks.

He didn't want to think of home, but he couldn't stop himself. He saw his house clearly and all at once as if he were in an air balloon hovering overhead. There was his small back yard with his father's tomato bushes, their leaves sharply outlined, like a row of paper cut-outs; the aviary (birdless now); the sweet peas like pastel butterflies climbing up the fence. Tears pricked his eyes. He searched his mind for the things he disliked, like the reeking kerosene heater; the grey cracked pumice stone on the bathroom sink (black after his father used it); the bluish bottled milk warming on the concrete step. And then another image: his mother dressed to the nines along with a lot of other well-dressed people. It had something to do with the rough diamond. His mother seemed different - more precise, her voice more genteel. When everyone had gone, she'd taken him aside and warned him that he must never wear a brown suit, or say, 'Pleased to meet you,' or file his nails with anything other than an emery board -

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as if the opportunity to commit such peculiar blunders were likely to present themselves to him some time soon. Her breath had been fragrant with sweet wine. He'd never smelled that sweet wine on her since.

The wind was blowing more strongly now, and the sea was a leaden grey. He made a pillow of the knapsack, and lay on his side with his hands tucked into his armpits. He'd already picked out the ship on which he meant to stow away.

He fell asleep before darkness came. Half of him was sheltered by a low bluestone wall, but the half of him unprotected from the wind was very chilled indeed. Yet the cold was not enough to rouse him. Nor did he wake when the wind whipped at his poor exposed cheek, turning the pink flesh white as an egg.

And then he was dreaming. He and his father were walking along rocks looking for crabs. His father carried the large aluminum bucket, while Harold prised up the rocks and peered underneath. None of the crabs was large enough to take home, and eventually, his father said it was time to go. Harold refused, and scrambled into the water. The water became deep very quickly, yet its depth did not impede his movement. It lapped at his chin, but he continued to run, his feet skimming along the sea bed. Then he looked back and could no longer see his father. He called out, but heard only the gusting of the wind and the crash of waves. He called again in a voice that strove to be strong, but was thin and stifled in his own ears. 'Dad!' The merest of caws. He woke with the cawing sound still in his ears. But the sound came not only from his throat. Seagulls were circling overhead. Only half awake, he was overwhelmed with sadness. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he could no longer see the ship. ✓

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The sun was climbing rapidly, yet the wind was still cool. Harold's face and fingers were numb with cold as was one half of his face. One ear was throbbing, and his jaw and teeth ached too. But his relief at missing the ship fuelled him with energy and stamina. Even with his aching face and its peculiar coldness, he felt buoyant. He ran most of the way home.

Meanwhile, Harold's parents were beside themselves with worry. When they discovered Harold's absence, they searched the house from end to end. In their small house, this did not take long, and the circumstances of their looking made it seem infinitely smaller. They'd torn the bedclothes from Harold's bed, but his note had wedged itself into the flap between the pillow slip and the pillow and been overlooked. By late afternoon, they'd questioned everyone in the street. Molly Ollard, who could have helped, had gone to her sister's for lunch, and been persuaded to stay on. After that, they called the police.

The sergeant was cheerfully optimistic. 'Boys run away,' he said. 'Then they come back with their tails between their legs. If I had a quid for each time I'd seen it I'd be a rich man today. He'll be back when he's hungry. Tomorrow morning. You mark my words.' Evelyn, thinking of Harold out all night, cold and unfed, was sick to her stomach; Don, clenching his fists, felt murderous. His headache, bad this morning, was now much worse. Even before this business with Harold, he'd been having headaches. More and more over the last few months. It was the new job in the boot factory. Yes, sir. No, sir. Permission to use the lavatory, sir. Like a kid in school. If his wife hadn't been present, he would have sworn. And now Harold taking off without a word to anybody. A kid of his age. That ass of a copper had just about topped it off too. He'd

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never had such a desire to hit someone in all his life. Or even better to slowly strangle the man. The sergeant had a thin womanish neck, despite his black hair and five o'clock shadow. Don looked down at his large, callused hands, and told himself to pull himself together.

Both parents sat up all night. Nothing else to be done till morning, the sergeant said. (Nothing else?) Outside, a dog was whimpering. Some poor cold beast. The sound coming at regular intervals burrowed into Don's brain. He found himself holding his breath waiting for the next one. At last, the whimpers produced a rhythm with the beating in his head. Thirteen years ago, such painful sounds came three minutes apart. He pictured his stopwatch, lost now, its face with the sharp black Roman numerals blurring as he waited and watched and counted down the seconds. Then a gush of water, and he and Evelyn staring at one another in confused silence.

The throbbing in his head intensified and behind clenched eyelids he saw Harold as he was when they'd camped along the foreshore at Rosebud. Harold was crouched beside a small rock pool looking at a sea anemone in the act of trapping a small fish. But behind him, a wave was swelling out at sea, growing tall as a tower as it gathered speed and rolled silently towards the shore. The wave was a dark brown, almost crimson - the colour of no ordinary wave. Don opened his eyes and closed them again, but this monstrous scene persisted. The pain in his head was unbearable. He clasped both hands to his forehead as the wave, now the colour of dark blood, crashed over the rocks, the rock pool, and Harold. ✓

At the same instant, Harold ran through the open front door, and into the room. Don pressed all ten fingers over his eyes. To Harold, it was as though his father were shielding himself from some fearsome sight. From him! Harold! But Don, trying to

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calm the mounting pressure in his head, saw his son only dimly like an apparition through a swirling veil. On the one hand, Harold was there before him pale and bedraggled in the familiar sitting room. Yet there was something wrong. Harold was twisting his mouth, and grimacing in a most frightening way. Seconds later, Harold, the standard lamp, and the fireplace - were whirling into the air, darkly speckled now like the pattern on the kitchen linoleum. Then, Don was back inside the four walls of his skull with the scene on the rocks playing over and over. As in a film where the projector had stalled, the tall wave hovered and quivered for ten long seconds before finally bearing down on his son. He saw blinding light, and then darkness as the blood in his head pounded along its narrow vessels, through the minor tributaries dashing finally against the weakened sides. A break, the width of a single hair, allowed the blood to seep into his brain. Faintly, he registered the vibrations of Harold's shoes on the rug. He tried to raise his head. Weariness overcame him. He slumped sideways, his fingers scrabbling on the nubby tweed upholstery of his chair. And then nothing.

Harold stood over his father and gripped his shoulders, about to shake him as though shaking someone awake. Then, he saw the look in his father's open eyes. Was it horror? Fear? Afterwards, when he saw his face in the mirror, he understood.

Dr. Harris wrote the death certificate. Later, he dealt with Harold. 'There's paralysis in the muscles, and that accounts for this.' He tapped Harold's drooping lip, then turned to Evelyn. 'A Bell's Palsy,' he said. 'Probably related to the recent exposure. But it will improve.' The two of them would have to be patient. And hopeful. That often helped.

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Harold looked at the back of Dr. Harris's head. At the baby pink scalp showing through the silver hair. A scalp as pink and innocent of harm as his father's had been. Dr. Harris said his father's aneurysm was like a ticking time-bomb. That it could have happened at any time. But Harold knew he'd set that timer. Sons who killed their fathers could and should expect retribution.

Harold remained in bed for two months. Dr. Harris assured Evelyn that this could do no harm, and might even do some good. Harold himself seemed not to care. Behind the ribbed orange hoods of his eyelids, he and his father floated in the limitless sky. His father was smiling. Golden motes encircled his head like a halo. Below them, fleecy clouds sailed in stately rhythm across the sky; vaporous vehicles in a celestial cortege.

When Harold opened his eyes, the vision melted. Reality interposed: there was his parents' bed stripped bare; the mattress airing on the verandah; the naked bed base against the wall - an iron black skeleton with rusting bones of mesh and coils. He strove for another reality. A reality made out of words which would triumph over the travesty that was real life. Later, in his stories, his father lived again. His stories were like the thin golden silk spun by a silk worm, fine filaments spun in darkness beneath a perforated lid, the sticky, criss-crossing threads binding them together.

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