

My brother's fist

Up north where the land is long and flat we shoot parrots in stumpy, straggly trees, cook them over open fires, dig holes to shit in, and then go out and shoot some more. Thomas' finger on the trigger never shakes, his face sits tight and still along the barrel. He kills so many birds with no show of emotion, no tears, not even a flicker of a smear on his cheek, just a small, smart smirk when we arrive back at camp with dead birds dangling from our raised hands. It isn't like that for me, everything that dies with my gun dies with a nervous, anxious finger and a face full of almost-fear because it is evil and God has told me to kill it or because we are hungry.

Thomas plucks and guts and gets the soft bodies ready for the pan while I climb a tree and see if I can see China, or God, but I can only see Thomas. Here, away from home, I see our differences more than ever, in the way we shoot and in everything. Getting here meant Dad had to write another of his long lists listing all the things that go on a list: powdered milk, cheddar cheese, salt, pepper, toilet paper, shovel, soap, greaseproof paper, bread, matches and on and on it went and even included the list of where he kept his

lists. Thomas helped him with the list and even added some items of his own: Monopoly, road map, spare film for the camera. While they were making up their lists I was up the back of the house chopping wood so when we came home there would be a nice stack waiting ready to stoke up the kitchen fire.

I sit in the tree and don't come down until Dad calls out and tells me off for not helping Thomas, or forgetting to do item seven on the list of things I have to do each and every day even though we are on an adventurous holiday.

I don't like killing birds but there are people I want to kill. Like Luke Wilson, the fat bastard who whacks the side of my head whenever I walk past him. Like Mr Thomson, the newsagent who yells at me in his shop when I drop a Phantom comic on the floor. Like those Russians on the ABC radio news who cart Hungarians away in cattle trucks as they piss and shit all over themselves and the people standing next to them. I hate those Russian communist bastards and every time I think of them or read about them in the morning paper I cry and wish someone would kill them and let the Hungarians out of the trucks. But I'll never kill anyone, because God said, Thou shalt not kill.

I can only kill with a purpose and Jesus Christ is my best friend. My first superhero. The Phantom, the Ghost Who Walks, is great but he only saves people who go into his jungle, or people he hears about on the tom-toms and he only saves people from bad people. Jesus wants to save everyone and everything. I am the youngest ever altar boy in the history of Genoralup. Our local priest, the Reverend

Frederick Ball, reckons I will be Australia's first ever pope. That the Anglican Church does not have a pope at its head, merely an archbishop, does not stop him – the Reverend – or me. We are High Church. Not all of us, just Mum and her mum and me. Thomas only goes to church when Dad goes because he and Dad don't like the kneeling or the singing and they only do it with their mouths barely open and with a sort of croaking noise. Mum and I sing loud and clear and sometimes I can see water slide down her cheeks.

I can't lie, there is no way, because God will punish the liar. I know there are liars walking around, free to lie again and it bothers me, but I believe God will get them, eventually.

If someone says, Did you do that? and I did, I say, Yes.

Did you burn the cat's tail?

Yes.

Did you take the block of chocolate from the fridge?

Yes.

Didn't I tell you to tidy your room?

Yes.

Haven't I told you before not to speak like that?

Yes.

Did you make that scratch on the back of the new car?

What? No, but I did shoot the little robin redbreast you found in the garden last week.

I did. The shame. Blew his guts.

Can't stop myself, want to, but once the gun is level, and he is in my sights, and I know I can't miss, a cold calm like Thomas has comes over me, then the movements take over,

bypass my conscience. It's Satan. He is in me. I don't even bother to say, Get thee behind me. There is no room. The calm has left, I am up against a wall to stop my body shaking, to steady my aim, then pop, his guts go, disappear.

I stand over the little fella, his bright red breast wet with blood and guts, the tears run down my face and my own guts jump and what will God do now? He sees everything. Will he get me, make me pay, punish me? Or will Mum, who loves robin redbreasts more than any other birds that fly into our garden?

Mum says it is because I have pinks disease. Dad says I have a salt deficiency and makes me start every day with a spoon heaped high with it.

When you were a baby you were nervous and angry and cried all the time and I had to hold you and even then you fought, says Mum.

What's pinks disease?

They're not sure.

How do you get it?

Nobody knows.

Dad says, He has to learn self-discipline, like Thomas.

Self-discipline? What's that? Do I have to smack myself when I'm naughty?

They laugh. I like it when they laugh.

We are back from up north. Mum is busy. Dad is at work. The day is the first warm day since we got home. I have filled all the woodboxes in the house. Thomas has a book I've been reading. He won't give it back.

It's my book, he says.

I know, but I was reading it.

I grab it. He grabs it back. I yell at him, push him, then he leans back and throws his fist into my nose and it splatters blood all over a wall and Mum comes running and, guess what, she takes one look at us both and then she attacks me. Not him. Not the one who throws the fist, not the one who is holding his hand, hiding it, the red knuckles, no, not him, but the one who is bleeding all over furniture, the floor and the wall too, yes, me, the screaming one, the one with the voice.

I scream, Mum screams, but Thomas remains calm, as though life is a thing outside of him and plunging his fist into my nose was on a list he had written down last night before bed and now he can cross it off because the job is done.

I yell, inside my head, I wish you were dead!

And Mum says, You wait until your father comes home.

Dad comes home, walks in the front door and she tells him. He laughs and says, Boys will be boys.

Mum doesn't like that, runs upstairs to her bedroom, slams the door and sobs so loud we can hear her even though Dad turns up the radio for the ABC news. And I sit next to him while we eat dinner at the kitchen table and inside my head I wish my brother was dead.

My brother's head

My brother's head gets broken and it's my fault because of the things I say, not out loud but privately, inside my head, the place where I say those things that can never be spoken. But how? How can it be my fault that my parents sent the nose-splitter away to Grammar School and on his first trip home his head crashes into the back of a truck backing up South West Highway and breaks into pieces and nearly kills him forever?

No-one says it is, but I take the blame anyway. Like I always do. Because of the things I think. Because people tell me: It's the thought that counts. And: God knows everything, even what you're thinking.

The people in the car behind find Thomas in the front passenger seat with his head caved in. The driver is the father of a girl from Grammar School's sister school, St Joan's. They take Thomas and the mother to the Bunbury hospital. These are the days when people stop to help and don't bother to wait for an ambulance. Everyone just gets on with the job. They pick up the kid with the crushed skull, put him on the back seat, and drive as fast as they can.

Dad takes the phone call.

Thomas has been badly hurt in a car accident, he says. He's in Bunbury Regional Hospital and they are transferring him to Perth.

Dad puts the phone down and keeps talking in his way, as though life is a thing that goes on outside of him and he is simply giving voice to a list he has inside his head.

They ran into the back of a truck, just out of Dardanup. No-one else is hurt badly.

But Mum can't hear him anymore. She screams and falls on the floor. I run. I can hear Dad talking to her and I'm pretty sure he picks her up and puts her in their bed, probably with an Aspro. I run to my bedroom, crying and asking: God, forgive me for wishing my brother dead and now he nearly is and why did you have to do this to prove your point? I only wished him dead, God, I didn't try to kill him, or even hit him with the furniture covered in my blood. Don't forget, God, that he was the one who broke my nose. Yes, says God, but he didn't wish you dead. Are you sure? Were you listening to him at the same time you were listening to me? Yes, you were? You mean there are three billion people in the world and you can listen to all of them at the same time, even those who don't believe in you? Were you listening to the Russians when they dragged the Hungarians out of their homes and into the cattle trucks? Why didn't you stop them? God? You there, God? It's about now that God stops talking. He's angry. Why didn't you stop it, God? I am afraid of his anger, of what he can do, the fire and brimstone and pestilence, even though I don't know what pestilence is. But I don't doubt him.

I can hear a car and voices and Dad is knocking on my bedroom door.

Your mother has gone to be with him. You and I will hold the fort.

Will he be all right? Will he ...?

Live?

Yes.

Yes.

And then we go off and cook dinner, me peeling potatoes and dropping tears on the skins, licking salt from a spoon, while Dad writes a list of things to do the next day: take Jack to school, call Grammar School, notify President of Inner Wheel Club, grocery shopping, pick up ironing, organise house cleaner, call Doctor Arthur. Because that is the sort of people Dad wants us to be: organised, disciplined.

Inside my head, for days, I scream: God, let him live, please. I beg you. I'll never think anything like that ever again, ever, never, even if he breaks both my legs and cuts my bum into tiny pieces and feeds it to the chooks. And I reckon God is listening, because he lets my brother live and lets me keep my bum.

God makes Thomas stay in hospital for six months and undergo all kinds of nasty surgery after peeling the skin back off his head like you would peel a peach and then God makes him go back for regular visits and wear a skull cap to hide his baldness and the long scar that runs around his hairline and the one that sits on his forehead that looks like he has run into the back of a truck. Maybe God puts him through all that to make me suffer and make sure I always

make room behind me so Satan will go there when I say:
Get thee behind me, Satan.

All that time Mum stays with Thomas and I live with Dad as though life is a thing that isn't what we are going through and everything is well planned and written down in a precise order including my daily spoonfuls of salt. And all that time Thomas goes, when he can, to Grammar School, and everyone makes way for him, stands aside and lets him through and I'm not sure but I imagine that they place cushions around him as he walks just to make sure he doesn't fall and hurt himself.

And not once, in all the time that Thomas suffers, do I think it is because he broke my nose, or because he once pushed me off my bike so his friend who was over for the weekend could grab it and they could ride away sniggering at me. No, and not because he embarrassed me in the sandhills with his friends and their erect dicks and me with my tiny floppy thing that understood nothing of my attempts to make it rise and be proud to be a man. Did you see that, God? Did you? What was all that about? What's it for? All this stiffness? How can that be fun and why am I not stiff like them? And is that the kind of thing you have on a list of things to do when you get older?

Not once do I think that.