

## 1. FORGETTING

---

I've forgotten something very important. I'm sure of it. And I want to say something, but I can't quite seem to ...

I wake up often, these days, with thoughts of this kind. Sometimes I'm not sure if I've actually woken.

Toast. A bowl of cereal. Tea. These things ground me again and the world solidifies.

Words don't come easily to me anymore. I think once I may have been a great conversationalist. I could hold a room in thrall. But I seem over the years to have lost the art. Or perhaps I simply lost interest. I think this and many things, while trying to remember what was so important.

Even with my children, conversation doesn't always come easily. Perhaps I've become boring. Possibly bored. Probably both. Most of the time, there's simply nothing worth saying. And not a great deal worth listening to.

Even just a short while ago I tried to have a conversation with my daughter. She telephoned me, very dutifully, for my birthday. My sixty-eighth birthday.

'G'day, Dad. Happy Birthday!'

A satisfactory start, one might think, to a conversation.

'Thank you. How are you, sweetheart?'

Thus far, a conversation is like a game of chess: there are only a few possible opening gambits. It's after this that things become more complicated. It's pointless to record this conversation since nothing of import was said. Each knew the other was alive and reasonably well. No wonder texting has become so popular. 'Here I am. I'm still alive!' Perhaps I should text this every day to anyone who might care.

Oh, but in the past I've known conversations that came to life.

The conversation itself becomes a living being in the room with us. It might bounce around like a playful puppy, or rise and threaten like a cobra. It becomes so much more than an exchange of information. When that happens, it is wonderful. It's like falling in love. It *is* falling in love. I have wanted to relive the experience again and again. And so I would move on from person to person, from setting to setting. Always looking for that original experience, that first love. But it's like trying to see, again, that singular sunset that once set me aflame, long ago. Every subsequent sunset reminds me of the experience I once had, and leaves me just a little disappointed.

That's one reason I force myself to attend those quiz nights on Fridays. To keep my social muscles oiled, certainly—I might vanish into a sinkhole otherwise—but also hoping for some intelligent conversation. But it's usually too noisy, and I'm often disappointed. With myself as much as with my companions.

Even today, although she's been married twice, I still think of my daughter as Connie Burnett. My recollections of her birth and the events surrounding it are vague and fuzzy, at best. This is not something new. It has nothing to do with age. I've never been any good at remembering these things.

At meals, when we had friends over, Lucy and I—Lucy was my wife for a time, and Connie's mother—there was often conversation about the children.

'My Eric was just nine months old when he took his first steps,' one of the friends might have said. I can't remember who. I can't remember whether there was an Eric among the children of our friends at the time.

'I remember when Connie first walked,' my wife would say. 'Do you remember, Sean?' she would ask me. She might have touched me on the thigh, in that way she had of making sure I was paying attention. 'We were away in Mt Gambier at the time ...'

No, I didn't remember. It might have been only five years earlier at the time, but I had no memory of it. Oh, I remembered going to Mt Gambier. I remembered carrying Connie around in that ungainly

contraption on my back, hiking all the way to the rim of the crater. But I had then, and have now, no recollection of Connie's first steps.

I wasn't there for Connie's birth. She was delivered by Caesarean section after an extended and unfruitful labour. Not that I particularly wanted to attend. I doubt her mother did either.

Eventually, Connie grew to look more like me than her mother, taking after my own mother's side of the family. But at that time she didn't look like anyone, not even herself, really. I try to remember what I felt when I saw her for the first time. I can imagine, but not really remember, the scene. A hospital bed, some kind of crib, Connie in Lucy's arms. I no doubt held her. Connie, that is.

I do, in a way, remember holding the small thing. At least, I remember, since, holding other small things like her and feeling awkward and clumsy. No doubt I felt the same way holding Connie on the first day of her life on this planet. I would like to be able to say that I felt some profound organic connection with her, that I was linked to her immediately by a sense of kinship. The truth is they could have handed me any baby, within reason, and I wouldn't have known the difference. She may have been a week old or more before I would have been able to tell.

I can't, of course, remember any *actual* conversations from that time. Or any other time, for that matter. I can only claim, of any particular exchange, that it might have been, just possibly, something that was said. I doubt, though, that much was said then, at the birth. A birth is one of those times when people make all kinds of conventional sounds, some of them words, most of them not.

I say I don't remember things, and mostly I don't. But sometimes I think I do, be they events, conversations, people or places. I might have this image or script in my mind that conforms, in almost every respect, to what other people call a memory. And, indeed, it may, on occasion, be exactly that. However, I'm always open to the possibility that I have made the whole thing up, or am borrowing someone else's account from their memory. Maybe I read it in a book or saw it on TV. Everything I claim to remember, I concede, could be regarded as

fiction. It should be taken, as they say, with a pinch of salt.

I met Lucy at the end of my third year at theological college, when I was undertaking a parish placement. She was a nurse, the daughter of the rector. We were married about a year later. We haven't been together now for, what ...? Thirty years? More, probably. I haven't seen her since ... It would have been at Craig's wedding. She was still a very attractive woman back then. Lucy was always what I suppose you would call 'classy'. It's almost impossible to think of us together now, let alone *together*, in that more intimate sense.

The only evidence that we were ever together is Connie; and, of course, Craig. Connie was a big girl when she was born, which is odd, since neither her mother nor I are particularly tall or heavily built; neither were either of our parents. Connie was blonde initially, when she finally sprouted a crop of hair. This later became a dark, reddish brown. But I always think of her as blonde so that, when I see her again, sometimes at intervals of several years, I might fail to recognise her. I remember, at her brother's wedding, seeing this young woman approach. An attractive, sophisticated woman.

'You don't recognise me, do you Dad?' She wasn't angry, just mildly, ironically amused.

I must have mumbled an embarrassed denial.

We don't live in the same city. At times we've lived in different countries. I worry, occasionally, that she rarely thinks of me. Craig, I'm sure, doesn't. He didn't call on my birthday.

So many birthdays, most forgotten. What does this body I wear today have to do with the boy I once was?

## 2. THE BLUE METAL POLICE CAR

---

Sean, four years old just the day before, held the beautiful blue, shiny metal police car in his hands. It was a present for his birthday from Uncle Harold. He liked Uncle Harold. He liked him much more than he liked Uncle Cyril, the younger of his father's brothers. Uncle Cyril was bald, with a long, narrow face, and sometimes peered at Sean from over his glasses and smiled, revealing long, crooked teeth. Once, when his mother made Sean get out of the bath and come into the front room wrapped in a towel, to dress behind the chair, Uncle Cyril laughed and teased him.

'You don't have much of anything to hide back there, do you, Sean m'boy?' he had said, winking at him.

Sean wanted to sink into the floor. When Uncle Cyril smiled at him, Sean wanted to run away and hide; sometimes he wanted to hit him.

Uncle Harold, though, was a slightly fatter and jollier version of his father, with a thick head of dark hair. He laughed a great deal, but not *at* Sean. He laughed the way people who are ticklish laugh: because life had brushed a feather across the bottom of his soul. And then he laughed because laughing was one of the funniest things in the universe. When Uncle Harold laughed, Sean laughed too, although he didn't always know why. Uncle Harold had given him this car yesterday when he came over to visit. He had presented him with a big box wrapped in golden paper and tied with a red ribbon.

'Your Auntie Lois wrapped it,' he said. 'If I had wrapped it, it would have unwrapped itself by now and escaped.'

Sean opened it excitedly, glancing occasionally at Uncle Harold, or at his parents. He didn't look at his older sister Sally, because he knew that she would be sneering, ready with some nasty comment. He

undid the ribbon and pulled off the paper to reveal the box, with a blue police car printed on the side, its lights flashing and ‘wah wah’ sounds in the air around it. He could read the words ‘wah wah’ and make the sounds; which he did, making himself and Uncle Harold laugh. The box opened to reveal the shiny, blue, metal police car inside. He went up to Uncle Harold and gave him a hug, while his uncle patted him on the head.

And he was still holding the blue car a day later. He had taken it to bed with him, and scarcely let it out of his sight. He had been slightly—but only slightly—disappointed to realise that the lights didn’t flash and there were no ‘wah wah’ sounds. But he could make the sounds himself.

His uncle had shown him how to make it work.

‘Push it along the floor like this, pressing down hard.’ He did that two or three times. ‘Only let it go when you’ve got the wheels spinning real fast. Like this, see?’ And he showed him the wheels whirring and spinning at lightning speed; and the serrated metal disc poking through the bottom, spinning so fast that you couldn’t see the teeth on it.

‘What’s that?’ Sean asked.

‘That’s part of the motor; that makes it work,’ said his uncle. ‘Look at those wheels go!’

And now Sean was in the front room, sitting on the linoleum, aiming the car between the legs of the dining table. His mother was in the kitchen, and he could hear music coming from the radio in there. His father was at work and his sister at school. His younger brother, Dougie, was having an afternoon nap. The front room belonged to him. He was trying to see how fast he could make the car go, and he had figured that three pushes were about as much as he could do; and then the car would zoom away, crashing into the sofa on the other side of the table. He thought it would be a good idea to line up some of his toy soldiers under the table, so that the car could plough through them. Then he piled up some blocks, with soldiers behind them. He revved, one, two, three, and released the car. This time, however, he mistimed

his release and the car slammed into the leg of the table, flipping over and turning slowly on its back. The wheels continued their free-wheeling spin. He slithered over to the car on his backside and reached down to pick it up. And the viciously spinning metal-toothed wheel on the bottom of the car sliced its way into the palm of his hand.

At first he didn't realise what had happened; but then he looked at his hand and saw the blood flowing. It was this, rather than the pain, which triggered the uncontrollable wailing that forced its way up from his stomach, into his chest, and out through his mouth into the room. He managed to scream 'Mummy! Mummy!' between sobs. He clenched his fist, pushed it as far away from him as he could, and averted his eyes.

His mother ran from the kitchen. 'What on earth is all the racket about?'

Then she saw the blood dripping onto the nearby rug and her eyes widened, her hand moving to cover her mouth. She wiped her hands on her apron and knelt beside the boy.

'Silly boy,' she said. 'What have you done?' Sean's gaze unwittingly followed hers, and he began to feel ill, seeing the crimson stain spreading through the yellow pile of their new rug. This yellow rug had replaced the old, worn-out blue one just last week. He felt sick because of the blood. He felt sick because he had ruined the new rug.

'Let me see, let me see,' said his mother. 'I won't hurt you.' She gently pried open his fingers, although he gasped, less in pain than in fear. 'There, there,' she said, taking her handkerchief and wrapping it around his hand. She picked him up, kissed his forehead. 'Let's go to the bathroom and clean this up and put a nice Band-Aid on it.' She kissed him again. 'Shush, shush. It's fine. It's nowhere near as bad as it looks.'

'I'm sorry, Mummy,' he gasped between sobs.

'Don't be silly. You don't have to be sorry.'

She washed his hand, letting cold water flow over the wound. He would not look at it. He shivered and began to sob again.

'That's enough, now. That's enough. Don't be a big baby, now.'

Close your hand on this,' she said, handing him a moistened face flannel. 'Hold tight.' She fetched down some gauze and a Band-Aid from the cabinet. 'Open out your hand, now.' He pulled his hand away. 'That's enough, now!' she repeated, a little more firmly. 'Give me your hand.'

'No,' he sulked.

His mother's shoulders slumped as she let out a sigh and closed her eyes.

'Please, Sean. Just give me your hand. It'll be all better with this on it.' She showed him the Band-Aid and the gauze. He shook his head.

'Why ...?' she began. She put the dressings aside, closed her eyes again and brought her hands up to her mouth, clasped as though in prayer. She sighed once more, opened her eyes. 'Please, Sean, give me your hand.' She reached out and grabbed him by the wrist.

'No.' He struggled angrily to pull free.

'Sean!' she shouted at him.

He continued to struggle and kicked out. His mother's features tightened, her mouth drawing into a narrow line, her eyes opening wide. The lower lid of her left eye twitched. Fear pushed aside Sean's anger.

'Stop it!' she spat at him. 'Stop it immediately.'

He stopped, but began to sob again convulsively.

'Stop *that* too.' Her tone rose, with the hand she raised to slap him hard on the leg. He tried to stop crying but couldn't. She hit him again. His sobs became silent shudders. His mother pried open the fingers of his wounded hand and pulled the flannel away. She dabbed his palm with some of the gauze and then placed a piece over the seeping wound and covered it with the Band-Aid. 'Now go to your room,' she ordered, 'and stay there until dinner time. I don't want to hear another sound out of you. Go!' She followed him to the door of his room, bent down and slapped him once more on the leg, and slammed the door behind him. Sean slid down to the floor, his back against the door, and cried.