MARTIN KOVAN

Necessary Rites (a short history of violence)

I

From the earliest years, and for many years thereafter, the voice accompanies him. Foreign, but familiar, it's barbed with an edge beyond which opens abysses. He knows his father was born into the shadowlands of Europe, in the first half of 1940. He's heard that the men of the father's family fought on the other, resisting side, the good side. But there's no way of knowing the truth, of the time, of their enemy, notorious for being more unhinged than the worst of their German counterparts. Of knowing if his own family had a hand in the excesses, very distant now, still brooding in its veins. He imagines he has no part in it, born as he is into the lucky country, to the lucky migrant father, over three decades later.

But if his own senses are to be trusted, the father might have made a good black-shirt himself: he is apt to leave some hapless local bleeding from at least the nose, perhaps the ears as well, for the smallest trespasses. Once, still a boy, he has seen the father accost one of these feckless men, a beer held loosely in one hand, and the tiny, infant fist of his wayward sister, gone wandering, in the other. The man tells the father, "The little girl was lost. I was helping her find her way."

He watches the father approach on a concrete path, crowds shifting in slow-motion. It is Bronte in midsummer, laconic bodies merged in the seaside hive, 70s radio hits suffused in salty air, the lilt of the season, billows of affront bursting its reagent surface, the man, beer flung away, lying in pooling blood after a sudden blow: something learnt in a post-War training-ground, the most effective means for disabling a threat. Which would be—? An anti-Communist, a Western traitor to the cause? Who exactly is the enemy to distant young men in training?

But the father is a convert to the West, his heroes are Hemingway, Elvis and JFK (it appears, in that order). The father has fled a disdained homeland, running at nightfall over the mountain border, in the pouring rain. Running until he lands in the Great Southern Land. He's in his mid-twenties: a creature of survival, clever with a toolbox, unforgiving with women, a chess-talent, a 60s jukebox charmer who's hitched a way from native service barracks to U.S. hospitality on German army-bases. Who's taken up the gauntlet of the long flight south where, if all else fails, his fists will, he thinks, save him.

The young migrant, among all the others, finds ready work. He thaws in constant sun, the wheeling harbourside gulls, a city under construction, its seamless blue backdrop, abundant wages for men who use their hands. On occasion he plays competition chess for money, beats state champions, even gives the odd political speech at the club. Things which mark him out as a member of a community, a place where he has a place. Marriage with a talented local girl seems the right start, a step out of the occupied migrant zone. They move into a beautiful house with high ceilings; his father-in-law is in medicine. He's accepted in the new country, barely trying.

But his ambition looks further: to try free Europe over again, a wife and child in tow. He still speaks good German, they might make a second life, after passing up the benefits of the first. The couple with child venture to stolid burgher towns, with their rivers and tolling bells, enchanted white winters. Bourgeois Central Europe in the mid-1970s is a different challenge, but one for which they have resources; she is able, he is bold. He seeks out earnings, and possibly more, between the acts of his personal history. To survive, he knows, you need to show your fists; struggle and obstacle warrant their use.

It has begun in earnest: the battle that will last the duration. There are surprise police-inspections, suspicions of crime, even German shepherds on chains—like the old wartime movies, crackling on the great plain of the 1950s, in her own innocent, sunburnt country. But this isn't make-believe: the small family end up in custody; it's never clear why. For years afterwards, there's rumour of espionage, terrorist links, undisclosed sums too large for new arrivals to keep without good

reason. The boy is baffled by foreign voices, the pristine hard snow in the steel-trap night.

No-one learns the facts, and the father never tells. What is clear: deportation, to a third country. The fists come out, now, on the talented, young wife, a would-be new European (but not as he is, born into a place of black-shirts, and bombs, unexploded on the living-room floor). They fly one-way, not south but west, far over the Atlantic.

From the place of deportation the father wills, alone with the son, to return to the same field of no fortune, to face the latest foe, and—what? Clear his name? Start again? Redeem the other losses? The tyrannised wife is left behind, the boy's palm curled in his own, the flowing river still there beneath clanging bells; the war is long over, but has just begun. The father is thrown again into custody, the boy bundled away, somewhere. For some time, no-one knows where, not the mother, pregnant with a child already wounded in the womb. Not the father, and not the son, who closes his eyes and doesn't open them until the last of the clamour dies down.

II

This is how it holds on, the war in another fight, the father still in flight. The young, criminal family is re-united, flies all the long way south, as if shell-shocked. The father crashing his way through barriers, now, like the victorious Americans to which he likens himself. He's still a hero of the West, in the wilds of suburban Sydney, dug in with boozers and wogs and belligerents; he's lost the opening battle, perhaps, but not the chosen war.

The mother begins to know it—in the least victorious way. The newborn child knows it, in her unformed mind, fed an adrenal terror even before the real thing confronts her. Like the father, born into battle, but in the great southern irony of peacetime, prosperity, ease, nation-building, where a migrant still has a chance, if he uses his hands, is willing to work them hard. The father does these two things, to survive the second transplantation, but all else he destroys: marriage, home, façade. Hard liquor loosens his fists, kept in iron

gloves. The wife flees, one torrid night, with the little boy, the infant girl shocked, permanently, out of her mind.

But he, the boy, doesn't recall being struck himself. He remembers all the others, suddenly flayed and flailing, at the father's feet. And the mother—flung across continents, an elegant mirror watching from the wall. These things he can recall with a childish precision, but not his own injuries, a bruised face or blackened eyes. For him, it has always been the voice—a floridness he's never heard in the other, Anglo men, who are merely brazen or loud. He chills at its threat, as if exposing bone. Even long after they have fled, the voice follows after, like a black-shirt in the street.

It lasts, that sound, through decades of boom, of youth, not quite bust, through times of near-drowning. He visits the father, even tries from a sense of loyalty to live again under his roof. Once, mid-way through high-school, the father gives him a large, bone-handled fishing knife to take in his bag and use against a tormentor. Over the years men have returned, from Vietnam, then Iraq, and Afghanistan, while the father has kept up the home-front. The government are fools, the father says, to return the service-men: foes always grow strong again. He rails at the TV, at his countrymen—the old ones and the new. Disturbed but never diagnosed, the one-time contender a master of anger and liquor, cauliflower nose and paranoia, who says he may be beaten but not defeated—a stock literary conceit he lives by, when he bothers to live by something.

What is incredible, for the son, is that the father is still fighting, long after whatever war has been fought, or lost, or won. It's all the father knows, alone in a red-brick two-bedroom apartment, on the top floor. He visits him there, out on an arterial road. There have never been newfound friends, women, civil family dinners. He never hears good news, a paternal word, a birthday well-wishing, let alone a blessing. It doesn't matter what he does, even he is an enemy, at the end of the long day. He is a police stooge, an agent of intelligence, a poofter, a kangaroo-fucker; he is nothing, is stupid, a piece of pig-shit. He's heard the same now for decades, the abuse and its thought-disorder; hundreds of times he's risen against it, but never struck out, himself.

He says barely a word in reply, and lets himself out. He wanders through placelessness, marked by the sound worn into his skin, into the father's yellowing walls, with their faint, fading photos, never complemented. He leaves the country, sometimes for years, and lives other lives. He moves across the world and can breathe only in moving: the Himalaya, or California; in Paris, Phnom Penh, Prague. It doesn't matter where.

He even travels, twice, to the father's homeland: both times in midwinter. The trains are overcrowded, full of Eastern border-crossers with bulky white-goods. He's given a seat overnight in the guard's cabin: cigarettes, schnapps and cards. It snows heavily, outside. Woken before dawn to catch a bus, across the mountain border, he supposes there will be questions, but also some answers. He's eighteen; it is a New Year. He drinks daily with the father's brother until he's jaundiced, his liver burning in his side. There are gypsies in vacant fields, whom the family disdains. One night they take guns out and fire them into the air, a genial, drunken ritual. He stays in the generous guest's room and writes for days in a notebook—another, necessary, rite.

This visit precedes, by a handful of years, the eruption of a new, national conflict. It again produces the worst internecine violence of any European conflict since that of fifty years before. Large numbers of men and boys are rounded into disused sports-grounds, or fields, walked to empty rural backwoods, lined up against long deep pits, and killed. The abuses against the women, left behind, are abysmal. From this time, he starts using an alternate name, its origin opaque. Ethnicity, it seems to him, is not a blood sport, and he doesn't want to play.

On the second occasion, twenty years later, he rides in a car across many versts of flat plainland, bare and neglected. It's dankly cold or snowing, the clouds stay low for weeks. En route, there are low, ill-kept wood and plaster houses, their walls riddled with bullet-holes. He imagines people, stray passers-by, caught in crossfire, crumpling where they stand, among the yard weeds. Along the road, passing a small-town bar that looks inviting from the outside, they stop and enter. He takes in the company: hefty, heavy-shouldered men with beers, their sports-jackets of uniform style. They might be former soldiers.

On the wall there is a sepia portrait, hung high with offerings: gold chains and ribbons, Catholic insignia and icon-cards, even wildflowers from some vanished, virgin spring. The face is unknown to him, someone from a buried past, but the position of honour he still holds there is clear. Later, in the car, his travelling-companion mentions the wartime fascist leader's name, a token of the blackest years of the nation, around the time, in 1940, into which the father was born.

Nearly half a century in exile, the father has never returned.

Close to another decade passes. He sends postcard greetings from every other city, makes purposive calls. He returns and sees the father, every so often: to see if something is to be salvaged from the scoured years. He could never have the women he's known—brown, and black, radiantly graceful—meet the ill-disposed old charmer; he prefers not to expose them to verbal injury. Even the white women are never good enough: they're not right in the head. He could never send the father his own unexpected publications, printed by celebrated presses, something the father could crow about. It would mean declaring his loyalty to another worldview—not Western, not European. Not anything the father would ever care to know or countenance. Apart from genes, and history, they have nothing, at all, in common.

He braves a visit, now and then, and stays a night in the spare room, wondering what survives forty years in the desert. The father's fists shake now, when he loses to the son: chess is their only real or possible conversation, played out simply and starkly on the black and white squares. Pure causation happens there: undeniable, beyond blame or dispute. They can't argue with the movement of the pieces, once they're moved, just as you can't argue with God. There's no sense in railing against wins or losses, and they take each with a good enough grace, even congratulation. A benign law of fate floats above them: objective, unimpeachable.

He visits the father for this chess-conversation, its rules of a stainless truth, the necessary rite it enacts between them. They play for hours, sometimes a day or more, in the poor, sallow light. Each game lasts an hour, sometimes two; mutual patience and tact build like slow music over the board. A PhD in philosophy, the son plays much better than he

used to; the game is a sole place of surcease, a sublimated war. A common respect for the shape of thought, seems enough, and a good game can redeem failure beyond the board: giving up his queen, he checkmates the father three moves later—the sudden wild beauty is a shared liberation. He sees a smile of the intellect illumined, unaffected, lighting the father's face, as if for the first time. It seems there's a language of the mind, beyond blood or words, that betrays the falsehood of violence.

III

But chess is not life, or even philosophy, and the father doesn't care to salvage it. He's survived the decades without it, alone with the TV and its purgatory tidings, the football and cheap newspapers. He uses the phone, a sole companion, but mobiles and computers are beyond him. There are no new photos on the wall, and only the travelogue of postcards sent from all over the world, liberally displayed. There are two, at most three, friends who rarely visit, still alive as relics are in distant rooms, inured to the malign tones bursting from the earpiece. The rest are dying. The father's fists never rise against him, as they never have, though the voice does, when they stop playing: abuse and blame, baseless accusations, the same ancient imprecations.

He'd like to say, Nothing changes does it, old man! He knows the father is possessed, but still he wants to ask: Do you know the fact of your purgatory, why it is, what you choose it for? A sharp mind on the chessboard, a witless dunce in life! But to question anything is to be an enemy, and even unsteady on his swollen feet the father, aged now, flays the son not merely with the voice, its anger unrelenting, but with the siege of time, with how long it has lasted—ineluctably! As if time is his last, unbeatable weapon.

As if the father has never felt the wear of it, how it slowly, but surely kills a spirit—not his own, but which must be wounded so his own can survive. But *why*, he wants to ask, would it want to survive over forty years of such waste? Every sheer gift of a day thrown to dogs and shit and bile! For what? What have you had to protect all this time? Your pride, your past, your insufferable self-regard?

So that when the hounds come out again, at every turn of a short season, and the voice breaks out of its cage and assaults him as it has always done, he knows it might have been easier if he'd been struck, really beaten, all along, so he'd have sound reason to strike back. Things might still be made clear, on that field of pain, perceptible and bloodied. He's been haunted for years by dreams of forcelessness, of wanting to defend against attack; but dream-arms hang limp by his side, or reach out too slowly, as if through heavy water, to barely cut the air. He's never fought anyone; has resorted to violence unwillingly, and only rarely.

"What did I ever do to you?" he finally asks the father. "I've never done you any wrong."

This time seems unlike any other. The father shakes, lately, like a Führer: a little spastic tremble of the hand, held down by the side, as the voice grotesquely heightens. "What did you ever do for me?" the father says, quietly, an acid curling at its edges; it's not a question.

"I should never have come to this country, to Australia," the father says. "It's good that I bashed her—your mother. But I should have stayed in Germany. I had a girlfriend there … she was beautiful, a doctor."

He knows, now, he could silence him for good, and he might be right to. He pits himself against the father, self-pity straining at the aged eyes, which would like to cry—as they never have, when it's much easier to turn against homeland, or friends, or wife, or child. (The daughter is by now disowned, in the hospital, her name erased from the father's life.) He could take a step behind to the kitchen—take up the bone-handled knife always waiting in its drawer, nothing changed in it, forever, a frozen classical scene, the same forks and spoons and knives whittled down to nothing, caught in still-life, a perpetuum of rage. He can even hear the chorus, silenced all around him. He thinks, in a moment, of what it might mean to put the blade into the heart, dead already, but still far too much alive.

He could take the knife, this time, and show the father what the threat was really always to have been, even before he fled the homeland. They each know, father and son, that anyone can survive violence: they

are proof of the same, and know that violence always survives, especially itself. It thrives long and happily, and will outlive both of them, as well. The father would even fight on another decade, if he has that long. The son could try to hurt him, who would oblige him in return; a lot of damage could be done.

Could he kill his own father? It would mean finally proving himself as a son: here you are, you old charmer, what you always wanted! The way your people do it! Will this satisfy you? But there would be no point—in the theatrics, more mess on the floor. What lies in its throes, between them, is what has always brought them there. Where there's never been any other, the bond of blood holds on until it strains and breaks away. In a moment, something is finished, with no blow being struck. The father ceases to be a father, the son to be a son. History snaps, its threads pulled asunder; the perversity of blood is undone.

This might be called some kind of animal story, not quite a moral fable—without purpose, sense, or rhyme. Something he's always known, always suspected, what he prepared his whole life for; what he began in resisting, always useless in its resistance. The father loses everything, but believes he's undefeated. The son, in his turn, is not a saint, or a martyr, can't keep the story going—not an hour more. A form of draw, if not a checkmate.

He lets himself out; the last words—the last rites—that he can hear: "*one shit less*," behind him, as the father puts the chain across the door. No-one will know what any of it will have meant. Perhaps nothing; a betrayal of possibility; a child in the dark, deep in the 1970s, holding onto a closed fist. A resistor, or a black-shirt, fallen in the street, with all the defeated others.