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WILLIAM McINNES

FATHERHOOD

STORIES ABOUT BEING A DAD

FATHERHOOD

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WILLIAM McINNES

FATHERHOOD

STORIES ABOUT BEING A DAD

These are my memories. The names and descriptions of some people have been changed so that they too can preserve their own memories, in their own ways.

William McInnes

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To fathers and their children everywhere

and

Amanda

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book isn't a manual of how to be a better father, or how to be a father at all. It's just stories about the strange state that men can find themselves in, with all its adventures and permutations, its ups and downs, of how remembered events echo down through the years, of how suddenly a penny drops and you understand something a little more about that state of Fatherhood.

1

FATHER'S DAY PRESENTS

There are only two presents I can remember giving my father for Father's Day. One was a painting on a large piece of butcher's paper that I did at primary school. It was entitled a 'Portrait of Father' and my classmates and I had all painted one during the week of Father's Day.

The local Woolies was running a competition and was going to put some of the portraits in its front windows. Amazingly, somebody chose my 'Portrait of Father'. A head smoking a pipe.

I can vaguely remember my father having the odd durry on Boxing Day and at parties, and I recall he shared a smoke

with a car salesman after he bought what turned out to be a deeply unreliable and shiftless Holden ute.

Like most motors in used car lots, it had had a sign written in a professional hand describing the auto in a few words. Usually these were generic signs with things like 'V8 Power', 'Automatic', 'This Week's Special' or 'Classy' and were swapped around the various cars until they were bought.

The Holden ute, with a strange plywood cover over the tray that looked like it had come off a covered wagon from some black-and-white TV western, had never been adorned with any of these signs. Instead it had been heralded in purple lettering as 'A Canny Buy!'.

My father had muttered about this ute for a few weeks, sometimes around the barbecue or in the kitchen or at the table.

While other cars might have been newer and flashier, he was taken with the idea that this was the thinking punter's pick – a canny buy; the choice for the buyer who knew what was what.

My mother laughed. 'It's just another sign, just something they stick in a window, you silly man.'

'No, love, it's not. I know what I'm about,' my father said.

'You are talking about the one with the purple sign in the window?' my mother had asked.

'My word. A canny buy,' said my father.

'Cardinals only wear purple at Lent . . . Or when they're mourning.'

My father waved his hand. 'Christ alive, we're talking about a ute, not our boy Norm.'

'I'm just saying,' said my mother.

'We'll be right.'

Our boy Norm was the name my father gave to Cardinal Norman Gilroy, the Labor-leaning Catholic priest who had become Australia's first cardinal.

Notwithstanding my mother's misgivings about the cardinal's purple hue, the old man did indeed buy the Canny Buy, but as he puffed on that fag offered by the salesman I think he was starting to have doubts.

The salesman seemed a tad too eager and relieved, almost offering the cigarette as a way of calming himself down as much as celebrating the deal, as if he couldn't believe he had found a buyer for the Canny Buy.

In time, the ute's true character was revealed and my mother never let my father forget the purple sign. 'I told you!' she would say when the car wouldn't start or hissed like an asthmatic.

My father referred to the ute as 'Norman's Lament' when he was feeling fatalistic but more often than not

he simply swore and muttered under his breath, 'Canny buy, my arse.'

•

Apart from that dart to celebrate the purchase of Norman's Lament, the only other evidence of the old man chuffing came in the form of a photograph from his service days, with a cigarette in one hand as he stood in front of a row of tents. That's as far as his smoking went. So I have no idea why I painted my father smoking a pipe, although there was a loose interpretation of 'fathers' in quite a few of the works.

One kid got into trouble for making his father a pirate, complete with an eye patch and parrot on his shoulder, when we all knew that his dad worked as a bitumen layer with the council. Another boy, whose dad ran a newsagent down at Woody Point, painted his father as a vampire with fangs and a cape. So, in the scheme of things, a pipe was a pretty mild stretch and was inspired, I'm sure, by the fact that somewhere on some TV show or movie, some incarnation of a father had smoked a pipe – so that was good enough for me, and for Woolies too.

It seemed slightly ironic that an imagined portrait of my father should adorn a window in Woolies, for I

doubt my father ever set foot inside Woolworths, or any other supermarket for that matter. Shopping wasn't his domain, it was the world of my mother.

Later perhaps, when the renovated Woolies stood on the site of the old shop at Margate, he would have followed my mother around on a shopping trip, tottering along with unsteady steps, his body failing as well as his mind, dementia descending around him like a cloak.

But all that was in the future. Back then, my make-believe pipe-smoking portrait of my father hung in Woolworths and I was given a hanky as a prize. I kept the hanky and gave the butcher's paper portrait to my father.

He nodded and said, 'Who's this then?'

'It's you.'

He nodded again and said, 'Right then.' And patted me on the head.

•

The other present I can recall giving my father was from some dreadful manual arts class in the early years of high school. A cheese board.

It was the only thing I constructed in manual arts that didn't crumble to pieces within minutes of my completing it.

To say my efforts at manual arts were challenged was an understatement. 'Not quite right' was the style of which I was a master. I had produced a series of creations that ranked highly in the pantheon of dire and my lack of ability in measuring, cutting, joining and riveting played heavily upon me, because it was as if I was failing in being a functioning human being. In particular, a man, for manual arts was what men did.

In the early days of my secondary education, when prepubescence was giving way to puberty and the changes that were beginning to take place in our bodies were bubbling away like some fermenting hillbilly's brew, where body and mind were heading six different directions at once, there was a sense of treading unsteady ground.

I had an inkling that manual arts and navigating hormonal development might be a bit of a minefield from an incident in the final year of primary school. It was a Friday afternoon and a group of us boys sat weaving baskets for an hour. On these Friday afternoons students who couldn't swim were sent off to the local pool for lessons while those of us who could swim were stuck by some bike racks dipping bits of wicker cane into tubs of water and then weaving them into some form of basket.

It had the feel of a scene from a war movie where shell-shocked Tommies from the trenches of Verdun sat silently weaving in rehabilitation classes.

On that particular Friday afternoon, two boys who would normally have gone swimming joined us shell-shocked weavers because they were unfit for swimming duty. Barry Sphinx, a great hulking boy who had been kept down a year and whose nickname was Balloon Dacks because of the inflated nature of his stubbie shorts, was there because he had an ear infection. The other boy, Darren Lawrence, had the beginnings of a cold, or 'the sniffles' as he himself put it. Barry Sphinx seemed quite happy dunking the cane in the tubs for us weavers, but Darren Lawrence simply sat staring at Barry.

He turned and whispered to me, 'That boy Barry . . . Barry Sphinx.' He paused as if incredulous about what he was about to say. 'He has hairs, lots of hairs around his . . . around his big dickie bird.'

I stopped my weaving and looked at Darren and then at the Sphinx.

Well, if he was going to call a cold 'the sniffles', of course he'd call a prick a 'dickie bird'. I didn't know what to think about his use of the descriptive word 'big'. Instead, I looked at Barry Sphinx.

A teacher patted him on the shoulder.

'You look like you know what you're about, Barry. You could teach a few of these others how to handle cane. Boys, take note.'

I knew the teacher meant boys like me, for he had stopped beside me earlier and looked down at my effort. I knew my basket wasn't much chop, but this teacher decided to point it out to me just in case I didn't understand.

'What a sad, soggy lopsided thing. That basket is devoid of spirit.' Then he added a phrase that would haunt me throughout my manual arts training. 'Your father's a builder, isn't he?'

The words hung in the air, summing up the hopelessness of my position.

A part of me thought this teacher wasn't one to speak, for he hadn't actually taught us how to weave the baskets; he was just there to keep us quiet. Another teacher had given us a demonstration using a series of baskets in different forms of gestation. He was the basket man, but once his formative weaving wisdom was given he disappeared back into his classroom.

This present teacher was a fellow who walked with a limp and drove a car so tiny that it seemed almost to be a novelty toy pulled from the bowels of a breakfast cereal

pack. Norman's Lament seemed like a Roller compared to the teacher's funny little Hillman Minx. I had also seen him shopping in Woolies after school one Friday as I walked alongside Mum, and this was a sure sign to my tiny brain that he wasn't a proper grown-up man.

He had nodded to my mother as he walked past for he had taught one of my sisters, and my mother nodded in return. I'd also seen my mum occasionally give him some leftover salad rolls from the school tuckshop when she was on duty there. I had never asked why she and the other mothers did this, I just thought he was scamming a free eat. He had yelled at a couple of boys once when they suggested that he should pay for the leftovers.

'He's got a shopping list,' said my mother that Friday in the supermarket, as if this was some profound event.

'Dad doesn't go shopping,' I said.

'Unless it's for useless bleeding cars like Norman's Lament, so that's a good thing, I suppose. God knows what he'd come home with,' she muttered as she looked at the tins of State jam.

Not taking into account the Canny Buy, my father, it must be said, had form here. One Christmas when my mother was laid up with a severe bout of morning sickness carrying her fifth child, which turned out to be me, my

father was deputised to go off and buy some presents for his four children.

He had come back very happy with himself because he'd managed to purchase five bags of cement and two of lime, which were on special at the BBC Hardware store. It was an offer too good to walk away from. He'd completely forgotten the presents and my mother had had to race, retching, to the shops at the very last minute to fill the stockings.

But that was okay. My dad was a grown-up man – he wasn't supposed to shop in supermarkets.

As I watched the teacher with the limp in the supermarket, I felt a little tap behind my head. It was my mother flicking her palm against my melon.

'That man's a widower.' I looked at her blankly and she continued. 'His wife died, so he has to do the shopping for his family, all right? He's got a couple of little girls to look after as well as teaching the likes of you, so just watch yourself.'

And she went back to the tins of State jam.

I didn't say anything.

But when the teacher stood before me praising Barry's cane-drowning skills I remembered him paddling down the aisle with his funny limping walk wrangling his trolley.

It seemed to me only someone as odd as Barry Sphinx could understand the complexity of basket creation, that he could be as one with wicker cane.

'Like a beard,' whispered Darren Lawrence, interrupting my thoughts. 'Hairs like Captain Haddock's beard.'

Whatever one could say about Darren, he certainly had a graphic way of putting things. The idea that Barry Sphinx had hairs in his balloon dacks like Tintin's blustering nautical friend and offsider Captain Haddock was startling. I couldn't help but think, 'Blue blistering barnacles' as the good captain himself might have said.

Back at home, the image lingered. In a quiet moment, I found my father in the backyard and I spoke about Barry Sphinx as the old man stood burning bits and pieces of stuff in the incinerator.

'Hairs, hey?' he said.

'Lots, apparently.'

My father poked at the flames.

'Like a beard,' I said.

He raised his eyebrows.

'He's got Captain Haddock in his pants.'

My father turned to me and stared, his brow furrowed. 'What?'

I stared back, not quite sure what to make of his tone.

My father tried to join the dots. 'Haddock? As in fish?'

I had no idea on what grown-up tangent he was travelling, so I told him who Captain Haddock and Tintin were.

My father rolled his tongue around his mouth a little. 'Captain Haddock from the comics. And your mate Barry Sphinx has got a bit of Captain Haddock going on downstairs.'

Barry wasn't my mate, but this conversation was proving a little trickier than I had thought it might be, so I decided not to say anything and instead tried to give my best searching-for-knowledge look.

'You get a gander of this yourself?' My father paused. I thought a smile touched the corner of his mouth. 'Of his . . . uh . . . of this Haddock paddock?'

I shook my head and told him it was Darren Lawrence who had seen the hairs when they were getting changed for swimming.

'Darren Lawrence, eh?'

My father stopped poking the fire and looked at me.

I looked back.

Then I thought I should fill him in.

'They go swimming, usually on a Friday, but Barry Sphinx had an earache and Darren had the sniffles.'

My father nodded.

'Darren had the sniffles, eh? And he's got the gossip on Barry and his pants beard.'

I stared.

'Well, it can happen. Yes. The mystery of the Sphinx,' he said very wisely. Then he sniffed a little and cleared his throat. 'Don't worry, son, you'll understand one day and your Captain Haddock's not too far off, I'd say.' And he nodded his head again.

He poked the fire a bit more and said into the flames very thoughtfully, 'Captain Haddock.' Then, as an after-thought, he tilted his head towards me slightly and said, 'Watch out for that Darren fella, will ya?'

I stared at him, not quite sure what he meant. He was about to say something else but thought better of it. After a while he spoke again.

'You want to burn something?'

I did. And I forgot about the mystery of the Sphinx as a bunch of old cardboard and yellowing *Courier Mail* newspapers crackled in the flames.

•

I felt a similar uneasiness about the manual arts class as I did about the Sphinx's Captain Haddock because the manual arts department exuded the certainty and confidence that

was so alien to me. These were men who knew exactly how to take a piece of metal or timber and fashion it into an item that served a purpose. They worked miracles with bits of plywood and dowel to create a letter-holder or they'd take a piece of beaten tin and shape it into a perfect cylindrical scone-cutter, complete with a tiny arched handle riveted into the thickened fold on top. A 'utensil', the teachers called it.

In class, a teacher held up a thin tubular piece of plastic, then a hole punch, then a sheet of metal, then a hammer. 'These,' he bellowed, waving to the materials and tools like the models waved to the prizes on the quiz show *Sale of the Century*, 'will become THIS!'

He held up something that looked impressively neat and shiny. The class stared dumbfounded at this sorcery, even though some of us didn't know exactly what this impressive utensil actually was.

'A pot strainer, men! A pot strainer. Something to keep Mum happy.'

Apart from these pioneering manly skills, almost all the manual arts teachers were loud bears of men with incredibly neat writing and an aura of being impeccably tidy.

Even the one teacher who wasn't as loud and large as the others still exuded enough of these elemental manly

qualities to appear to belong to this rare breed. Mr Smythe, one of the metalwork teachers, was a slight man no taller than us boys and very quietly spoken. He never wore shorts, but instead wore dark trousers and a white shirt, occasionally with a dark tie. His hair was slicked back with Brylcreem and his voice was a soothing monotone. He quietly roamed the benches of the workroom almost in the manner of Alec Guinness's Obi-Wan Kenobi, indicating with a point of one of his fingers how a scone-cutter could be brought to fruition.

While he passed on his wisdom with a wave of one hand, the fingers of his other would delicately roll a cigarette, smoothing down the tobacco, almost weaving the fibres and gently cupping the Tally-Ho paper as a perfect roll-your-own would appear, like a small lightsaber, to be caressed by his tongue and popped behind his right ear for later use.

These manual arts teachers seemed to belong on a higher plain of evolutionary development, and we boys looked upon them with a sense of fear and awe. Soon it would become apparent that some boys were worthy of the highest form of manual arts praise; they were deemed to be 'handy and adept'.

The rest of us unfinished beings, a collection of lanky, podgy, unwieldy and mostly supremely uncoordinated

teenage boys, would do our best to navigate the treacherous obstacle course of woodwork, metalwork and the dark arts of technical drawing.

Technical drawing was a subject which confounded many. We sat in rooms with slanting desks and attempted to render elevations and scale dimensions of tables and chairs. Even worse were the floor plans and roof angles of imaginary houses we were asked to copy.

The subject was taught by a man who looked like a recruitment poster for manual arts teachers. He was stout with his business shorts slung around his gut and he always wore vertically striped shirts which would wrap around his stomach to give the impression of a spinnaker from a large yacht billowing with the sea wind on the homeward stretch to the line.

He was covered in a forest of hair except for his clean-shaven face, which grew darker by the hour with the encroaching day's growth from his body's scrubland. His nickname was Donger.

'That looks like a humpy, not a home, and your writing's like chook scratchings. You're not somebody from the back of beyond, McInnes.' And he shook his head and said the words I knew were coming. 'Your father's a builder, isn't he?'

I blushed and stared down at my slanting desk. The teacher moved on.

Some students, though, were deemed worthy of the highest praise the teachers could offer. The class would be called to attention after one of the manual arts masters had prowled around the room and stopped by a workbench. 'Men!' would be the call and we boys would gather and stare as another boy's scone-cutter would be held aloft by the teacher in front of us as some fine trophy, 'This utensil is well made. This is what you are after.'

•

Looking back on it, I can see that giving boys the chance to create something out of bits and pieces of plywood and tin could give them a sense of achievement.

But it was also an exercise in insanity – the 'utensils' were uniformly crap, and even the ones that were correctly made by the teachers were, on closer inspection, completely ill-suited for the purposes for which they were intended, no matter how 'handy and adept' they might be.

A flat pot strainer with a thin piece of plastic covering its handle did nothing more than scald the holder while the overflow of hot water from the pot would give the person something to go on with. The letter-holders disintegrated,

the scone-cutter rusted and left odd specks of metal detritus on dough if it was ever used in anger. The people who were adept at making utensils probably would have approved of the strange plywood wagon cover adorning the back tray of Norman's Lament, for it was as useless.

All this, though, was with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, the trauma of having to try and emulate these manual arts masters to their constant refrain of 'Your father's a builder, isn't he?' seemed torturous.

And along the way there were unintended consequences, such as the dreaded scone-cutter incident.

In metalwork, the normally quiet Jedi Smythe was facing a Herculean task to ensure that at least one boy in my class completed a scone-cutter. As the term had progressed, Mr Smythe had seemed to become more drawn and tired, the scone-cutter campaign weighing on him heavily.

We were the worst class at the school by far and would cannibalise each other's efforts – and pinch a part of someone else's cutter if it seemed to fit better than our own. This had been going on for most of that first term's foray into the dark arts of scone-cutter creation. Jedi Smythe decided to make each of us identify the pieces of our scone-cutter with a small stamp. This was, I thought, slightly extreme.

'Now, boys,' said Jedi Smythe, in his pleasant tones as he made a roll-your-own in his left hand. 'Choose a stamp to mark your work, there's no point in taking each other's bits and pieces, it proves nothing.'

There was a tumbler filled with different punch stamps from which we were supposed to choose an individual mark, but teenage boys being teenage boys, not one of us thought to take a different stamp, for that would have taken too much initiative and presence of mind. Instead each boy used the same brand, a little star, to identify our pieces of scone-cutter. When one student had finished making his mark, the same stamp was passed to the next student.

Why it was never noticed can probably only be explained by the assumption that any given group of human beings could not be as stupid as that class. Such a lack of suspicion had consequences though, for Jedi Smythe, usually the calmest of the teachers, became increasingly irate over the weeks as he worked his way through the bits and pieces of tin left on the shelves as we all hovered around scavenging.

'You, the tall boy, McInnes, the builder's boy,' he said evenly.

I turned with a few bits of illicit scone merchandise.

'Let me see them.' I proffered my stolen tin bits and he saw they were all stamped with a star.

'These aren't yours, boy.' He rolled another cigarette, and I noticed that his durries were becoming a little more ragged and less defined. He scrunched up his smoke.

I nodded that they were mine.

'They're all correctly measured, boy, they can't be yours.'

I nodded that they were.

He rolled another fag, even more unruly than the first. 'Let me see your mark.'

I showed him my star stamp. He fossicked through the pieces of tin and he made a noise in his throat.

He stared at me and the stamp.

Mr Smythe rolled an invisible durry, nodded and walked around the room very slowly. He was extremely quiet for the rest of the lesson. At the end, when we walked out, he put the smoke in his mouth and stared at me. He was about to say something but as he took the rollie from his mouth, half the makings stayed on his lip and then disappeared down his throat.

He staggered over to where we had placed our scone-cutters and picked a few up and looked at the stamps as we filed out the door for little lunch.

It was Howard Barber who found him by the incinerators, a place preferred by students who wanted to have a quick chuff on the sly with tailor-made cigarettes, usually Winfield or Escort, which earned them the name of the Incinerator Club.

Teachers would occasionally go to the Incinerator Club to nab an errant student or maybe even to have a smoke themselves.

Apparently, Jedi Smythe had been about to have a man-to-man chat with a few members of the Incinerator Club and had taken a deep suck on his smoke and promptly exploded into a coughing fit while shaking as evidence in the open palm of his hand a few pieces of scone-cutter.

'McInnes's scone-cutter –' He had stopped and then belched a river of smoke and collapsed, his hand balling into a tight fist around the scone-cutter metal.

He'd suffered a heart attack, and even though Howard knew the dangers of being caught openly with a lit cigarette, he bravely ran off to the staffroom and raised the alarm. Apparently he explained away the lit Winnie Blue he had in his fingers by saying he had picked up a lit smoke as he walked past the incinerator and thought he should put it in a bin. As the teachers ran to help Jedi Smythe, Howard stayed in the staffroom and finished the fag, ashing it in a

cup on the staffroom desk and earning himself a certain status amongst the rest of us.

The fallen Jedi was taken to hospital and never returned to school. Howard Barber was praised at school assembly and another teacher came and oversaw the completion of our communal scone-cutters.

I don't know if I was the only boy in that metalwork class who felt a bit guilty about Mr Smythe but the news went around amongst students – and parents – that it was our scone-cutters that nearly did him in.

My father fronted me in the backyard.

'Hey you,' he nodded his head at me, 'be careful what you bring home from school – we don't want any lethal weapons coming here.'

I stared a bit gormlessly.

'No killer scone-cutters. You got that?' And he winked.

Was he joking? I wasn't sure.

'It wasn't just my scone-cutter –'

The old man rolled his tongue around his mouth, then nodded his head. 'Don't worry, sunshine, poor old Stan Smythe smokes like there's no tomorrow, something was bound to go bung sooner or later.'

My father needn't have worried, I didn't bring the scone-cutter home and, even though I finished it by picking

amongst the sadder bits of metal, I didn't want it in the house any more than he did; it was cursed. I'm sure I wasn't the only boy who tossed their 'utensil' into the bin.

It was woodwork where I completed the one item that I felt I should bring home and, unlike the killer scone-cutters, it was all my own work.

My mother thought it would make a nice Father's Day present for my old man. 'He'd like to see what you've made. Anyway, it's the thought that counts.'

It was a lamentable effort. The handle wasn't straight and instead of the hexagonal design required, it was a misshapen particle-board disaster, the Richard the Third of cheese boards:

Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.

Well, if a dog was going to bark at any cheese board it would be mine. And as the day came closer to take the cheese board home after they were graded, the manual arts teacher's words rang in my ears.

The fact that my father was a builder only exacerbated the awfulness of my cheese board. All the implied criticism

of the teacher's words was obvious. Not only wasn't my work good enough, I wasn't good enough and my father would see this in the evidence I was to present to him in the form of my Richard the Third cheese board.

There was a truly terrifying manual arts teacher – a tall, fair-skinned man, with lank ginger hair sheared into a rather childlike bowl cut and with great veins that seemed set to explode from his muscular legs. He held my cheese board in his hands and beckoned me with a nod of his head to come and collect my piece of woodwork.

He was terrifying because he seemed to be some sort of hybrid between student and teacher. He was the youngest of all the manual arts teachers, and even though he followed their standard dress – rubber-soled shoes, long socks with a pen or metal pencil tucked in the top, business shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and a tie – there was something about his manner that made him seem closer in age to us students than the other teachers. He yelled as much as the other teachers and was full of threats of thick ears and of us boys 'not coming the raw prawn with him', yet at the same time there were caveats – his voice, though loud, had a nasal quality, as if he'd just inhaled a helium balloon or as though his voice had only just broken.

And when he threatened us with a thick ear it felt more like a Chinese burn was on its way, where hands were placed on your forearm and then twisted in different directions. No adult would threaten with a Chinese burn, but a schoolyard tough might, like one of the older boys who had kept up with manual arts into the senior years because they were 'technically minded' or, in the words of my friend Beetle O'Brien, 'as thick as pig shit'.

And even though it was said that this teacher was a woodchop competitor, with a strong physique, apart from his ginger haircut he seemed to be otherwise hairless. All adult men seemed to balloon with body hair, as exemplified by Donger, but with his odd haircut the hybrid teacher seemed, the Barry Sphinxes of the world aside, not unlike the students he taught.

'You going to give this cheese board to your old man? The builder?'

I nodded.

He smirked.

'Good luck with that then.' And he sniggered a little. 'He'll be very proud.'

It was obvious, even to me, that my cheese board wasn't much chop and I couldn't see the point of this hybrid teacher taking the time to rub it in.

He looked like he was about to say more but thought better of it and just stared at me.

A shadow of doubt fell across my tiny brain; maybe my father would be as dismissive of my efforts as this teacher, he'd laugh at me and crush the uncertainly glued plywood before my eyes with his great paws.

Nevertheless, I presented it to him.

'What's this, then?' my old man asked.

'A letter-holder?' I said hesitatingly. Even I wasn't sure what the thing I had made was supposed to be.

'Right then,' he said and gave me a pat on the arm. 'Beauty.' He held it in his hands like some tiny tennis racquet. 'This . . . cheese board,' he said slowly, 'this is something.' He nodded like he often did, for no particular reason.

I didn't know if he was impressed. I suspected not, but the fact that he made no derogatory comment about its merits as a piece of construction made me think I had managed to get away with something.

I even felt slightly better about myself, as if in some way my father approved of my effort by merely ignoring it.

•

The next manual arts class after Father's Day the hybrid teacher asked me if I'd given 'that thing', meaning the cheese board / letter-opener, to my father.

I told him I had.

'How'd you go?'

I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'Yeah, okay, sir. He liked it.'

The hybrid teacher looked at me and after a while said softly, 'Good on him.'

Then he went to the front of the class and shouted at us for the next forty-five minutes as we endeavoured to make an ornamental placemat.

Not long after, in the school holidays, I walked around the local agricultural show trying to come to terms with a dagwood dog I had just bought. Dagwood dogs were always slightly unwieldy at best and I had made a bit of a blue when wandering around the schools exhibit with my huge battered shillelagh bleeding with a fountain of tomato sauce. Two dollops had fallen on the floor and splattered close to the town's manual arts display, collected from the various schools on the peninsula. Before I was moved on by a steward, I saw that my classmate Kevin McNamara had won a first place for his scone-cutter. It shone with

a burnished sheen and a little paper certificate and, even though I felt a twinge of guilt about Jedi Smythe, I couldn't help but think that a part of my work, indeed the whole class's work, had been recognised by the judges.

I decided it was easier to eat the battered hot dog on a stick dripping with tomato sauce in a stationary sitting position instead of staggering around trying to shove it in my gob. I settled at the woodchops where the seats were only half full for the heats, the finals being what brought the crowds. I saw one of my friends' brothers who was at uni. He was with his girlfriend and they both had long wavy hair and were studiously unkempt and a bit 'cool'. They were laughing at the competitors. Mostly these men had short back and sides and looked a little odd with their singlets, Dunlop Volleys and gleaming axes.

'It's so silly,' said my friend's elder brother. 'Sort of Freudian, hey?'

His girlfriend giggled. 'Oh, come on.'

'No, look, these guys in their ornamental uniforms standing before a phallic symbol and preparing to hack away at it, emasculating themselves!' He cuddled his girlfriend.

'Or their patriarchal complex! Cutting their fathers down to size!' She laughed again.

I didn't quite know what was going on, but I knew enough to know they were having a go, which was a bit odd to me as I quite liked the woodchops.

It was a standing block competition and hardly any handicap was called, the highest being a count of five so even I knew that this must be a very junior round.

My friend's brother laughed and said, 'Which one?'

His girlfriend pointed at a competitor at the end of the line. 'That one with the little boy's haircut.'

I was surprised to see the hybrid teacher. He was much older than his competitors, but not much better.

We had thought him a champion axeman, but he was coming last. His axe blows stuck in the wood, making a squeaking noise as he jerkily tried to wrench the blade from the block. He was trying to go too fast, his arms bulging but his angles were too shallow, he had no purchase on the wood.

He did look a bit silly, I supposed. His blows became slower after the winner had finished and soon his strikes took on a plaintive sound as the axe became stuck after each effort.

'Give it a rest, son, you had a crack,' said a man leaning over the fence. He was dressed in the same outfit as the hybrid teacher only he wore a jacket with a state

representative logo upon it. He looked very much like my manual arts teacher, but older. I guessed he was the teacher's father and the real champion axeman.

The hybrid teacher stopped, looked at his father and slowly took the axe out of the block. A marshal came and finished the block off with a chainsaw to make ready for the next round.

The cuddling couple giggled again and started kissing.

The hybrid teacher looked down at his axe and up at his father, but somebody had called his dad away, so he simply stood there, looking a little lonely.

Why, I wondered, did he bother if he wasn't much chop? It was the holidays. He looked pretty miserable. Then he laughed a little to himself: it looked like the time he'd asked me if I was taking the cheese board home to my father, and whether I thought my old man would be pleased with it. At the time I thought it had been a bit of a snigger, now it just looked sort of rueful and sad. Maybe he just wanted to make his father happy. I took a bite of my dagwood dog.

I remembered his face when he'd asked me how my old man had taken his Father's Day present. How he'd said 'Good on him' softly when I said my dad had liked it.

Perhaps he was going to say that it had been enough that I'd had a go and that it didn't matter that I wasn't as good as my father, it was just a funny little cheese board. For the hybrid teacher knew what it was like not to be as good as his father at something.

Maybe that was what he would have said.

•

I'm sure I gave my old man other presents but for some reason these were the two I remember. Perhaps it was because they were so dreadful – the cheese board should almost have been enough to have had me committed. But, more to the point, I think I remember them because of the manner with which they were accepted. A mixture of good humour and him not caring a flying fig, as if he had other things to be doing.

Or as if he thought that Father's Day was a bit of a joke, had a bit of an added-on feel to it, a poorer cousin of Mother's Day. Even today, people spend more on Mother's Day gifts than they do on Father's Day presents and that seems to be okay with all concerned. Fathers generally chin it and get on with their Sunday.

The days of Dad being given a new spanner set so he can happily change the oil or spark plugs or whatever it was

that fathers would do under a car bonnet, are long gone, a retailers' retro wish list. Hardly anyone does anything to their cars these days except sit in them.

The only time I ever saw my father use a tool of any kind on a motor vehicle was when he would grab a hammer and belt the starter on the engine of Norman's Lament. He would give it a few healthy taps and then climb into the cabin, turn the ignition and wait for the car to sputter into life. Then he would whistle, laughing as if he'd won the lottery, and say, 'Better than a cup of coffee to get you going. Bastard of a thing and I'll be buggered how it works, but chucks away!' And off he would drive.

Perhaps Father's Day is just a bit of fun, a retailers' date more than anything, but as I get older a part of me hopes that on those Father's Days my father knew I loved him, regardless of pipe portraits and deformed cheese boards.

For it strikes me now that it is nice to be able to tell your old man you love him and maybe even nicer for him to hear it, for each time my own children have said those words to me it makes me feel that way, and I wonder if he felt that too.

About six months after my father died, my mother told me there was a box of bits and pieces to collect. She had collected items that were my father's and divvied them

between her five children. 'There were some things I thought you all might like.'

In my box I found, amongst other things, a pair of cufflinks, some of his how-to-vote cards from when he stood for the local council, some of his thick square carpentry pencils, an old tie, and a programme from a 1973 rugby test between Australia and Tonga which was the first 'big game' of footy I had ever seen. It was also the first and only time I heard my father drop the 'F bomb'.

We had driven into Brisbane to Ballymore to watch the test in the wet. Amazingly Tonga had won 16–11. My father said nothing on most of the trip home as he sat behind the wheel trying to comprehend what had happened. It was only after we had passed Sandgate and were driving across Hayes Inlet along the long and bumpy Hornibrook Highway when he gave voice to his thoughts, muttering in astonishment, 'Tonga . . . (*hump*) . . . Fucking . . . (*hump*) . . . Tonga . . . (*hump*) . . . Fuck.'

There were a few other bits and pieces in the box and then, at the bottom, an old friend. A utensil. My Richard the Third cheese board. My father had kept it, it hadn't disintegrated. In fact, he had used it, not as a cheese board, but in a moment of necessity he must have grabbed one of

his carpentry pencils and written down some quotes for timber he was ordering upon the top of the board.

The numbers in his neat hand, the divided line and the total.

And, perhaps in an afterthought as he looked at the quote, he had written in his flowing running writing, 'This cheese board is something.'

I laughed, then stopped and almost cried. He hadn't thrown it away. I sat holding it for some time, thinking of my father.

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FATHERHOOD

by

William McInnes

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