

FIKRET PAJALIC

*Incision*

Every first Saturday of the month, Noah took a trip to Pentridge to collect the tapes his brother Reuben had been recording in prison. Over the last year the visits to his brother have become a messenger service of sorts. The tapes were made for their mother. Four years ago, she was knocked down by a reversing garbage truck while she was getting the rubbish bin. Since then, she has been in a wheelchair. Reuben had been in prison for the past two years and had two more to go. Noah listened to the tapes with his mother, but while she needed to hear her son's voice, he searched for answers.

Noah woke up early, had breakfast, did his homework and started getting ready. He put the container with two large slices of shepherd's pie on the bottom of his backpack. He had helped his mother make the pie yesterday. She wheeled herself around the kitchen and he followed her instructions. He peeled the potatoes and put them to boil. He then had to cut carrots and onion into small pieces with a knife. Their food processor had broken down some time ago and they couldn't afford a new one. His mother offered to cut the vegetables on her knees.

'Just give me the chopping block and a knife. I'll be all right,' she beckoned.

But Noah told her not to worry. He got the knife, ran his fingers along the blade, touched the pointy end; the muscles in his hands tightened instinctively, and he started chopping. When later on he took the baked pie out of the oven and the robust waft of a home-cooked meal hit his nostrils, he was pleased.

'It was your father's favourite, just like Reuben's,' his mother said while he held the dish in front of her. Her voice crackled like a slow-burning campfire.

All Noah remembered about his father was that one day he was with them and the next he was wrapped in a white shroud and buried. A few days later they moved out of their home. What

were left were a few photographs, his mother's stories and the feeling that a part of him was carved off and left behind in the dark earth.

Noah's mother sat in her wheelchair in the living room and flipped through junk mail. She glanced at her son occasionally while he prepared for the trip. The television was on, but the sound was off. She sighed as she put the catalogues on the coffee table. Somewhere from under the frayed throw rug that covered her legs she fished out a ball of yarn and knitting needles. Reuben's face flashed through Noah's head at the sight.

'Don't forget a bottle of water and your pills,' she said while her hands worked the needles with astonishing speed, 'and also take twenty dollars.'

Noah went to the kitchen and opened one of the cookbooks on the pantry shelf. Inside there were two twenties. He closed the book, not touching the money. He still had twelve dollars.

He slipped into his runners, put the backpack on and leaned in to give his mother a kiss. As he did, she held him on the shoulder with one hand. She licked the thumb on her other hand and ran it across his eyebrows. Noah let her do it. There was no point arguing.

'Handkerchief?' she asked and Noah tapped his pocket.

'Make sure you call,' she instructed.

Noah nodded and walked out. His mother rolled herself to the window and watched her son gradually pass from sight, fading away in the greyness of the street.

Noah walked to the train station, where he took a train to Flinders Street and then from there another one to the northern suburbs. On the train he tried to read but couldn't focus. Letters peeled off the pages and danced in front of his face. The pages would not stay still. They lifted and bent as if some invisible force was at play. He looked around to see if any of the windows were open but they were not. His muddled mind slowly cleared as last night's pill evaporated from his body.

It was mid morning and the train was full of commuters on their way to spend a day in the city or on the beach or at a footy game or maybe on the banks of the Yarra or wherever people who are not like him went to spend a day. He wasn't sure, but if he had to, he'd bet none of them were heading to a prison to visit a relative. While he searched the faces of the passengers, he felt his eyes burning. He darted a glance to the seat across him and saw an old lady watching him

intently. She wore a heavy black topcoat. On her chest was a Red Cross pin. Around the edge of the pin were the words Women's War Work.

Noah saw the old lady's lips move, but no words reached his ears. Her index finger pointed at the badge. She watched him for some time and this made his spine stiffen. He turned away from the old lady and stared through the window. Outside, everything blended together. The sky and the landscape were grey. Grey like the colour of my soul, his mother once said when he took her for an outing to the park. He thought then that she was talking about the winter, but today he knew she had his brother on her mind.

Reuben did a whole heap of bad things: robberies, beatings, extortions, shootings; there was also the rumour that he had killed a middle-aged man with stooped shoulders who worked in a Youth Centre on Wright Street in Albion.

Their neighbours told Noah, 'Make no mistake; if your brother did take care of that bastard, he deserved it.'

For his part, Reuben did nothing to discourage the rumours. He kept quiet but when pressed he said, 'For some sickos the only cure is a bullet in the head.'

Even the detective who came by their house to inform them that the police had nothing to connect Reuben to the murder admitted he was happy to see that man gone. 'Good riddance to bad rubbish,' he said. Shortly after, Reuben ended up in jail anyway for assault and robbery, and Noah was put on meds.

Outside, buildings slowed down, and inside, Noah's body jerked. When the train had come to a complete stop he felt a tap on his knee. It was the old lady. She offered him a biscuit, but Noah politely declined. He peeked into her bag and saw yarn and pair of knitting needles. Just like his paternal grandmother, proud of her needlework and service in World War II.

The last time Noah saw his brother, he asked him why they called him Needle. Reuben had said it wasn't because he was as thin as a tomato stake or because he was one of those blokes who don't put their brains into gear before opening their gobs.

'You see, some people take that as needling, me talking a lot.'

'It does get a little tedious at times,' Noah countered.

'Yeah, I know. Anyway, about me being called needle,' Reuben came up so close, that Noah could see the oily dirt in the cracked pores of his brother's smoke-dried face.

'Needle was my weapon of choice,' Reuben whispered. 'The knitting needle right in the neck.' He put a finger on his jugular, nodded significantly and added, 'It's messy but quiet.'

Then Reuben did something Noah didn't expect. He took Noah's hands into his and their fingers interlocked like a cane basket. Noah felt the hardness of Reuben's finger nubs and the

coarseness of his skin. He watched his brother's face. His head faintly trembled, as if his veiny neck hadn't enough strength to support the heaviness of the memories locked inside it.

'Brother, my hands are plenty filthy,' Reuben had said while still holding Noah's.

Noah pulled his hands out of Reuben's grip and placed them, palms up, on the edge of the table. He looked at them while he waited for Reuben to finish his story, but the bell rang and a guard came and took his brother back to the cell.

Noah thought about the whole scene while the train clacked on, running through the industrial estates of the outer northern suburbs. Spray-painted graffiti adorned the walls of the warehouses and factories. On the roof of one of the buildings, in thick black paint, was written 'Margot is a boy'. Noah watched the writing, craning his neck for a better view until it disappeared from his vision. The old lady did the same.

He continued to gaze out of the window even when the roof with the curious message was way behind him. The old lady stared into his eyes, intent on establishing contact. But Noah didn't feel like talking. He opened his book and pretended to read.

He got off at Coburg and walked to the prison. At the corner of Bell Street and Sydney Road he went to one of the telephone booths, put a twenty-cent coin in and called his mother. As he waited for her to pick up he could see her wheeling her chair to the hallway and reaching for the handset on the wall. He had suggested many times that the telephone be moved to the living room, but each time his mother refused. She said if they moved the phone she'd never leave the room.

'I'm here Mum,' Noah said when she picked up.

'Good, the pie still in one piece?'

Noah stuck his free hand into his backpack, pulled the container out and checked the pie.

'Yes.'

'You took your pill this morning?'

'Yes,' Noah lied.

'Good. Give your brother a kiss and a hug from me and call me on your way back. Love you, son.'

'Love you, Mum.'

'Don't forget the tapes.'

On the tapes Reuben talked about his time inside, the food, the guards, other inmates, mostly innocuous gibberish so the prison authorities wouldn't confiscate them. He was able to do this on account of being a well-behaved inmate.

Their mother had said, 'You just record them Reuben; anything at all dear, and I will listen.'

So Reuben did. When he had nothing to say he would read chapters from books or just sing. He would sing in English or songs in their mother's native tongue and she would listen to everything over and over again.

'Listen to his voice,' she'd say. 'He sounds very handsome. Next time, you make sure you bring me a photo of him. He sounds bigger; did he bulk up? Does he eat the food we send him?'

Only once on the tapes Reuben had talked about his life before the prison.

'When I came back from the Army,' Reuben said, 'I got entangled with a bad crew.' But then the tape stopped and was silent for a couple of minutes. Noah always wondered who erased it. Was it Reuben or the prison authorities? He wanted to think it was Reuben.

'Noah, are you there?' his mother's voice came from the receiver.

'Yes, I'm still here. I'll bring the tapes.'

Noah cast his eyes around the booth, reading the scribbles while still holding the handset. There was a phone number and a message where to meet if one wanted to have a good time with a well-endowed man. Noah was disappointed. The message wasn't as intriguing as the one he had seen earlier on the roof of the warehouse. He turned around in the booth and started to walk out, when he saw the old lady from the train. She had one of those shopping trolleys on wheels that old folk sometimes used as a walking frame. He couldn't remember her having it when they were on the train.

The old lady had a hand-knitted beanie on her head, pulled all the way down to her eyes and over her ears. In her hand she held the book he had been reading on the train. She handed it to him. Noah took the book and thanked her.

She motioned at the telephone and her lips parted but Noah couldn't understand her. He just said yes and held the door open while she got inside.

Noah headed for the prison. He walked the short distance unconsciously grinding his teeth. Thoughts throbbed in his head. He stopped, had a drink of water, turned around and looked at the booth. The old lady was gone.

When he had passed the security checks, Noah was ushered into the visitor's area. There he signed the visitor's book and got the white lanyard with a white visitor's pass. The prison officer who handed him the pass winked at him and pointed at the container.

'Apple pie again?'

'No, shepherd's.' Noah opened the container. With a long thin wooden stick the officer stabbed the pie a few times. He then smelled the stick and gave it a lick.

'This is good. If your brother doesn't finish this, you call me.'

'Sure thing, but I doubt it.' Noah had spoken to this same officer at least a dozen times, but he couldn't remember his name.

'How's school, son?' The officer put on a serious face.

'Good. No problems.'

'Reuben said Melbourne University already made you an offer.'

'Yes.'

'That's good, son. Glad to hear it. Just keep yourself busy and you'll be right.'

'Thank you.'

'Your brother's very proud of you.'

Noah smiled and nodded.

He sat at one of the small round tables in the corner of the visitor's hall. When he saw Reuben coming, he remembered the name of the officer — Mr. Carlyle. As they hugged, Noah smelled morning breath on his brother. Reuben sat down with a thud and rubbed his face hard and long, wiping crusted drool off his chin.

'You just got up?' Noah asked.

'Something like that,' Reuben said, and launched into the pie with his fingers.

When he was finished, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and emptied the small juice pack in one long gulp.

'Mum wants a photo.' Noah broke the silence.

'I can't mate, look at me. I look forty. Don't want to scare her.'

The brothers sat in silence. After a time, Noah spoke.

'Last time, you said they call you Needle.'

'Yes, they do.' Reuben tapped a cigarette on the table. 'You know, I could recognise his voice in a crowd of thousands. It was raspy and slimy at the same time. He smoked Lucky Strikes with no filter. There was this smell about him.'

Noah stiffened at the unexpected words, as tobacco stench enveloped him.

'They moved him after complaints started flying. I kept going from church to church pretending to want a confession.'

'Why the churches?' Noah asked.

'He was a priest.'

'The man from the Youth Centre?'

'Yeah, the same man. You remember him, right? You tutored maths to other kids there.'

'I remember going there,' Noah said, detached. The image of a hairy round belly and thick thighs appeared in front of him and he shook his head to rid himself of it. 'Then one of your mates left a message for you with me. He said the man you were looking for was in Dandenong.'

'What else,' Reuben's eyes widened, 'do you remember?'

'I found him in Dandenong,' Noah said. 'And I made him dead.'

'Those mesh partitions in confessionals came in handy.' Reuben made a stabbing motion with his hand. He clamped his teeth and a small snorting sound came out of his nose.

Noah closed his eyes and he could see his hand holding his mother's knitting needle and the pulsating vein on the neck just above the white collar. The words were spoken in a hushed voice. The priest leant closer and said he couldn't hear it. He didn't know the whisper was about to bring a blood storm. As the blood trickled down the back of his eyelids, Noah felt his brother's hand on his.

'Are you all right mate? Stay here, I'll get you some water.' Reuben got up and walked over to the water fountain. Noah watched his brother moving left and right in a funny, uncoordinated way. He looked like a drunken donkey on roller-skates going down the stairs, and Noah cracked a smile at that image flickering in his head. He smiled involuntarily while the thoughts born of nightmare came back and flooded his brain. The memory of being on his knees burnt his skin anew.

Reuben came back with a cup of water and saw his brother smiling. He smiled back. A bell rang, signaling the end of the visit time. Reuben held Noah by his shoulders.

'Remember my tenth birthday, when Mum got me this green ice cream cake?'

'No, I don't. I was four.'

A prison officer approached them and Reuben hurried.

'Anyway, Mum ordered this ice cream cake and she went to pick it up in her old Corolla. It was almost forty degrees outside. She brought back this melted sludge but we still ate it. That night you threw up all that green mess. Mum went to work; she was packing shelves at Woolies at the time. She told me to keep giving you chamomile tea and to keep you hydrated. We slept together that night.'

'I think I remember that. You put that stuffed elephant toy I loved between us.'

'Yes!' Reuben almost yelled. The prison officer held Reuben by his arm, slowly dragging him away. 'That's right. I took real good care of you.'

'I know you did.' Noah hugged his brother and kissed him on the cheek.

The prison officer jerked Reuben a little and said 'It's time, mate.'

They were separated and Noah felt like he was being cut. Only this time he didn't feel wounded.

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