

'A joy to read, with its complex emotional depths, and daring beauty.' **HELEN GARNER**

IN MOONLAND



MILES ALLINSON

'A story of our hearts, all broken, full, mystifying. Sublime prose.' **TARA JUNE WINCH**

1.

In March 1996, a few months before he drove into a tram stop, my father bought an old Ford Torino with the money he'd won on a horse called Holy Moly. He was a fast, erratic driver, and it made him happy for a while, that car — the roar of it, the faded yellow phoenix on the black bonnet, the way the road seemed to open up for him. He hated traffic, but when all the lights are green, you can slide through the universe like a spirit without a body. Then things started to go wrong, and he had to spend a lot of money trying to fix them.

I was seventeen years old when it happened. My sister, Tara, was a year younger. Our mother was away at a yoga retreat. At the time, I don't think any of us really believed he was trying to kill himself. What he was trying to do, we assumed, was crash and claim the insurance. That was the sort of thing he would have done, and in fact, I half recalled him saying something to that effect once. Even now, so many years later, I still sometimes believe this to be the truth.

In any case, my father died before we could ask him what he'd been thinking. But I also know that it's possible to think or feel a number

of contradictory things at the same time and to act decisively anyway. Maybe he didn't know which of the possible outcomes he preferred, death or insurance, maybe they were both okay in that moment, and what he really wanted was the thrill of sudden fate bearing down on him again. He was forty-three years old. I think he had been unhappy for most of my life.

About twenty years after he died, I became a father myself. It was a pretty tough labour — though I didn't do most of it, obviously — and I must have fallen asleep for a few seconds soon after my daughter's birth, because I can remember waking in fear at the edge of the hospital bed, confused, as if I had been lying on the floor of the ocean for decades and was only now being dragged back into the air.

I was in shock, and I think I remained in shock for a long time while I came slowly to understand just how definitively sundered I was from my former life. How lost, now, all those days and years were that preceded Sylvie's arrival. That period of my life was gradually becoming mythological. Or at least, it might seem like that to her, I thought, when she's old enough to imagine it.

Parents are only there to be memories for their children, Matthew McConaughey says at the beginning of *Interstellar*, a very frustrating film that's more or less forgotten now, and which I liked a lot for about an hour and a half when I saw it with Sylvie's mother, Sarah, a few days before Sylvie was born. In one scene, McConaughey leads his team of astronauts to an unknown water-covered planet, where they are hoping to find news of an earlier, doomed mission. And indeed, not far from where they land, the crashed remains of that first spaceship are

soon found bobbing in the ocean, still surprisingly intact despite the many years that separate the two expeditions. Due to some sort of trick involving complicated physics and wormholes, a few simple moments on this watery planet are equivalent to a whole year on earth. Though it's taken them years to reach him, the first astronaut would have landed and died only hours earlier. Disaster quickly ensues. The mountains, which can be seen on the horizon, suddenly begin to approach. But they are not mountains. It's a giant wave that's been building for miles and which nearly kills them all, thrashing the spaceship and flooding its engine. Delayed in his return to the mothership, which is parked in space somewhere on the other side of the wormhole, McConaughey arrives back to find that years have passed. On earth, his children have grown up. In little more than an hour, he has become, for them, just a distant memory.

My own daughter will remember certain things about me, I thought as we left the cinema that night. She will remember things that haven't even happened yet, but what will my previous life mean to her? All those moments up until now? And what about my own father's life before I was born? Where did that all go? How little remained of that, besides a few unreliable anecdotes and a box of discoloured photographs with their vague aura of recklessness. So little, and less with each day.

A lot happened over the next year or so. Sylvie became — quite slowly at first — a delightful person, although Sarah and I eventually agreed to separate. We agreed, and then we agreed not to, and then we disagreed completely, although neither of us knew what to do about it, and we continued living together because the alternative seemed too horrible

and too complicated. They say babies sense everything, that they are basically psychic, and maybe that's true, because even at the age of two, Sylvie was still waking five, six, seven times a night. We had tried to move her into her own room, and then we relented and let her come back into ours, so that during those periods when Sarah and I actually slept in the same bed, Sylvie slept between us, like a sacred rock that we worshipped and despised. Some nights, especially during that first year, she wouldn't sleep at all — none of us would sleep — and we would put her in the car and drive through the empty suburbs, past the same blazing 7-Elevens, the same ugly new apartment blocks.

I didn't think a lot about my own father during this period. I noticed him at the periphery of my thoughts, like you sometimes notice buskers on the street, and maybe I even threw him a coin every now and then — whatever that means — though I rarely stopped to listen. Then one day I went to the funeral of an old school-friend who had died suddenly, and who happened to share my father's name: Vincent. It was weird to hear his name spoken again, in such a context. It was also a terrible funeral. Nothing that was said even *approached* the mystery of the human life we were attempting to celebrate. People say 'celebrate', but they don't really mean it. Or they don't know what they mean. The priest went cheerfully through the motions, the same tired clichés no one believed anymore rolling off his tongue in a tone of heartbreaking complacency. Religion denies the weight of life, I once heard someone say. If it had been my child's body in that casket, I would have stormed the altar; I would have torn the hair from the priest's head. As it was, it was only my old school-friend's body. The ghost of my father's ghost. People filed up obediently for communion, while two screens hanging on either side of the altar displayed images from my friend's life. I saw

him standing beside some sort of temple that had been carved into the side of a mountain. He was older than I remembered him to be. Of course. He was nearly forty. He was my age. Someone had pressed play on a Dire Straits song. *Through these fields of destruction*, Mark Knopfler muttered. My old friend was in a jungle in Cambodia. He was at Machu Picchu. He was in Brazil. He stood amid some tiered green hills in a place that might have been Vietnam. Then my old friend was standing in front of that stone doorway again, in India, I guessed. He was looking into the distance beyond the frame, not unaware of the camera, but seemingly unconcerned by it, absorbed instead, perhaps, by the magnificence of the place in which he had found himself. But I had seen that stone temple in another photo, I realised. It must have been a famous tourist attraction, because my father had stood there once himself, many years earlier, in a dirty orange robe.

That old photo of my father had disturbed me, when I found it among his boxes after he died. It had been taken the year before my parents met, apparently, in 1976, when my father's hair was thick and dark, and he had a big Frank Zappa moustache. My father had stayed for a couple of months in an ashram somewhere in India, according to my mother, although that was before her time, she told me. She didn't know much about it.

That story had taken me by surprise when I first heard it. My father was not a religious person. I had never known him to set foot in a church, let alone in an ashram. He'd hated his own father, who'd been a Methodist minister, and it was impossible to imagine my father praying to anyone. He was not a joiner or a meditator or someone you could imagine chanting or swaying or doing whatever they did in an ashram in India. He was a man of the physical world. As long as I could

remember, he had worked for himself as a carpenter and as a builder, and, more generally, as a handyman, though no one taught him how to do any of it. He had taught himself, and he was good at it. He built things to last. If anything, he over-engineered them, as if he was afraid they would fall apart as soon as he turned his back. He did not trust that things would stay together. He did not trust authority, either. He hated authority. He swore at the television every time a politician opened their mouth to speak. He had strong hands, and tattoos of skulls on his arms. He liked to gamble and to drink and to win against the odds, even if it meant cheating, and, on more than one occasion, I'd seen him threaten to smash someone's face in with a hammer. And if you were to ask me what sort of father he had been, I would say that he was a good one, that he'd loved us, though I also know that I was terrified of him, that he had a rage we all feared, and that he was a troubled person, with a loneliness that could not be cured.

Above all, my father had seemed extraordinarily happy in that photo, and this, too, did not fit any idea I had of him. He was smiling in a way that I'd never seen him smile in real life. I'd never seen *anyone* smile like that. Much more than the robes or the hair, it was that smile that made the image strange: my father's extraordinary happiness.

But what had happened to that photo? We'd lost track of it in the weeks after he died, amid the numb chaos of funeral arrangements and police interviews. It had been too strange to even contemplate. I pushed it away and forgot about it. Suddenly, more than twenty years later, it had returned.

It took me a second to realise that I was the one who was whispering out loud. The images beside the altar changed again. My old friend was standing somewhere else now. The slideshow repeated itself. *What are*

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these moments? I kept thinking to myself. The priest was still speaking, but people were turning to look at me. *What are these images? Can religion ever approach them?*

Driving home that day, I nearly ran into the back of a RAV4. And that's when I had the idea to visit my father's old friends, the ones who were still alive. Banked in traffic, in grey light, on Punt Road yet again, I thought about those names from my childhood, my father's supposed friends: Abbie, Charlie, Denis. Names tethered to flashes of memory, to photos, rooms, gestures, admonishments, strange excursions in cars to who knows where. Names that flared up every now and then. Who were these people, and what did they know about my father that I didn't know? Maybe I could ask them what sort of person he had been. Who was he? What were the moments that survived? Out of fear, my father had remained a mystery to me. I was afraid to unwrap the forgetfulness that held him where he was: vague, embalmed, harmless. That's how it all started. I didn't expect things to turn out the way they did.

