

My brother's fist

Up north where the land is long and flat we shoot parrots in stumpy, straggly trees, cook them over open fires, dig holes to shit in, and then go out and shoot some more. Thomas' finger on the trigger never shakes, his face sits tight and still along the barrel. He kills so many birds with no show of emotion, no tears, not even a flicker of a smear on his cheek, just a small, smart smirk when we arrive back at camp with dead birds dangling from our raised hands. It isn't like that for me, everything that dies with my gun dies with a nervous, anxious finger and a face full of almost-fear because it is evil and God has told me to kill it or because we are hungry.

Thomas plucks and guts and gets the soft bodies ready for the pan while I climb a tree and see if I can see China, or God, but I can only see Thomas. Here, away from home, I see our differences more than ever, in the way we shoot and in everything. Getting here meant Dad had to write another of his long lists listing all the things that go on a list: powdered milk, cheddar cheese, salt, pepper, toilet paper, shovel, soap, greaseproof paper, bread, matches and on and on it went and even included the list of where he kept his

lists. Thomas helped him with the list and even added some items of his own: Monopoly, road map, spare film for the camera. While they were making up their lists I was up the back of the house chopping wood so when we came home there would be a nice stack waiting ready to stoke up the kitchen fire.

I sit in the tree and don't come down until Dad calls out and tells me off for not helping Thomas, or forgetting to do item seven on the list of things I have to do each and every day even though we are on an adventurous holiday.

I don't like killing birds but there are people I want to kill. Like Luke Wilson, the fat bastard who whacks the side of my head whenever I walk past him. Like Mr Thomson, the newsagent who yells at me in his shop when I drop a Phantom comic on the floor. Like those Russians on the ABC radio news who cart Hungarians away in cattle trucks as they piss and shit all over themselves and the people standing next to them. I hate those Russian communist bastards and every time I think of them or read about them in the morning paper I cry and wish someone would kill them and let the Hungarians out of the trucks. But I'll never kill anyone, because God said, Thou shalt not kill.

I can only kill with a purpose and Jesus Christ is my best friend. My first superhero. The Phantom, the Ghost Who Walks, is great but he only saves people who go into his jungle, or people he hears about on the tom-toms and he only saves people from bad people. Jesus wants to save everyone and everything. I am the youngest ever altar boy in the history of Genoralup. Our local priest, the Reverend

Frederick Ball, reckons I will be Australia's first ever pope. That the Anglican Church does not have a pope at its head, merely an archbishop, does not stop him – the Reverend – or me. We are High Church. Not all of us, just Mum and her mum and me. Thomas only goes to church when Dad goes because he and Dad don't like the kneeling or the singing and they only do it with their mouths barely open and with a sort of croaking noise. Mum and I sing loud and clear and sometimes I can see water slide down her cheeks.

I can't lie, there is no way, because God will punish the liar. I know there are liars walking around, free to lie again and it bothers me, but I believe God will get them, eventually.

If someone says, Did you do that? and I did, I say, Yes.

Did you burn the cat's tail?

Yes.

Did you take the block of chocolate from the fridge?

Yes.

Didn't I tell you to tidy your room?

Yes.

Haven't I told you before not to speak like that?

Yes.

Did you make that scratch on the back of the new car?

What? No, but I did shoot the little robin redbreast you found in the garden last week.

I did. The shame. Blew his guts.

Can't stop myself, want to, but once the gun is level, and he is in my sights, and I know I can't miss, a cold calm like Thomas has comes over me, then the movements take over,

bypass my conscience. It's Satan. He is in me. I don't even bother to say, Get thee behind me. There is no room. The calm has left, I am up against a wall to stop my body shaking, to steady my aim, then pop, his guts go, disappear.

I stand over the little fella, his bright red breast wet with blood and guts, the tears run down my face and my own guts jump and what will God do now? He sees everything. Will he get me, make me pay, punish me? Or will Mum, who loves robin redbreasts more than any other birds that fly into our garden?

Mum says it is because I have pinks disease. Dad says I have a salt deficiency and makes me start every day with a spoon heaped high with it.

When you were a baby you were nervous and angry and cried all the time and I had to hold you and even then you fought, says Mum.

What's pinks disease?

They're not sure.

How do you get it?

Nobody knows.

Dad says, He has to learn self-discipline, like Thomas.

Self-discipline? What's that? Do I have to smack myself when I'm naughty?

They laugh. I like it when they laugh.

We are back from up north. Mum is busy. Dad is at work. The day is the first warm day since we got home. I have filled all the woodboxes in the house. Thomas has a book I've been reading. He won't give it back.

It's my book, he says.

I know, but I was reading it.

I grab it. He grabs it back. I yell at him, push him, then he leans back and throws his fist into my nose and it splatters blood all over a wall and Mum comes running and, guess what, she takes one look at us both and then she attacks me. Not him. Not the one who throws the fist, not the one who is holding his hand, hiding it, the red knuckles, no, not him, but the one who is bleeding all over furniture, the floor and the wall too, yes, me, the screaming one, the one with the voice.

I scream, Mum screams, but Thomas remains calm, as though life is a thing outside of him and plunging his fist into my nose was on a list he had written down last night before bed and now he can cross it off because the job is done.

I yell, inside my head, I wish you were dead!

And Mum says, You wait until your father comes home.

Dad comes home, walks in the front door and she tells him. He laughs and says, Boys will be boys.

Mum doesn't like that, runs upstairs to her bedroom, slams the door and sobs so loud we can hear her even though Dad turns up the radio for the ABC news. And I sit next to him while we eat dinner at the kitchen table and inside my head I wish my brother was dead.