

## The Fall

He was falling; rushing past sky, clouds, birds, gargoyles. He could feel the air against his skin, pulling, pulling him back to the life he once had. His life. Years passing by in seconds as his body tumbled forward, fingers opening towards the wind and cold. He saw his wife, making dinner in the kitchen, her skirt moving slightly as she worked, tidying away the papers which always seemed to accumulate around the place, washing her face in the morning, water splashing up on the sink. He saw his children, babies in their cots, laughing as they raised their arms to be picked up; toddlers racing around the house on their little cars, cutting up pieces of paper on their plastic play table; as young children, throwing a ball around in the yard, fighting, dancing to music in their rooms. He saw the grass he mowed every morning, soft, proud in its tidiness. His wife's shining face; his children picking up sticks and leaves, wondering over the colour; his yard with its bicycles, swingset and beachballs; his office, filled with books, paperwork, an unfinished novel; birthday parties, pin the tail, ring-a-ring-a, duckduckgoose, bags full of chocolate, masks and blowers, teddy bears; laughter; tears; horserides; books; the dog chasing a thrown bone; all appearing before him as he sped downwards, wishing for time. He needed more time. Time to hold the images; to watch his story, his life, his colours, which flickered, dwindled, and died, as he hit the ground.

35 is early for a mid-life crises, but I was always early. I started walking on my own at 8 months, by 10 months I was running, and by a year I was speaking in full sentences. I was an early bloomer and early riser. The only child of zealous missionaries, I spent my first 5 years in a tiny village near Papondetta, Papua New Guinea, living like a native. Every morning, hundreds of vibrant butterflies would fly in through my window, filling the room, sunlight flashing off the gold, scarlet, sapphire and emerald hovering jewels, waking me long before the communal breakfast was served. I was out of bed and down to the river faster than any of the laughing children I played with; Moses, Jehosephat, Meshak, Jacob; their original island names replaced with characters from the old testament after rebaptism by my father. It was a successful mission. My father led by example, practiced what he preached, and preached with power and conviction. He was careful, devout, ascetic. He ate little, prayed often and was always upstanding and hard working, leaving for months on difficult inland treks to bring back converts, visiting places which had never seen a white man and where small scale cannibalism was still practiced. My mother hid her strength and intensity behind a small frame and ceaseless charity work, often at the expense of her personal tastes. She would choose the most obvious cases, those who cried loudest, those with the most lurid clothing, the clingiest and most demanding, expending her time and energy with daily visits, food baskets, attendance at funerals, flower arrangements, sick bed attendance, money, and of course prayer, for, like my father, mother truly believed that her salvation lay in sacrifice. She carried a permanent patter of prayer in her head and repeated it at odd moments, imagining that her zeal and vocation in this life would be perfectly and amply rewarded in the next. She had fine tastes, fingering the burned velvet pattern on her one fancy black dress, holding the heavy silver candlesticks my grandmother left her, or even eating with relish a buttery brioche someone brought over on a visit. Mostly though she denied herself these sensual pleasures, swallowing the cheap and tastelessness she drew to herself like a dose of heavenly cod liver oil. Short term pain for later gain. I spent hours swimming in the ocean, turning my fingers into prunes and coating my skin in a thick salt crust which left me exhilarated and hungry, ready to eat breakfast which we took at a long wooden table, with the others in our camp. I was always the first one there, giving me time to size up the simple dishes of ground yam, fruit, fish, tinned nut meats and vegetable protein imported from Australia. Grace was long and loud, led simply at first by my father, the cacophany of "amens" from the worshipful table increasing in intensity to compete with the lyrebirds and finches in the sky, until they stopped suddenly in a magic agreement of cessation which began the munching and clinking of breakfast. It was an idyllic life. A life of comradeship and community. During the day, the air smelt of salt and coconut. Once I finished my chores and

schoolwork, I had no other commitments but my daily ministrations to the sun and sand. At night, the black sky was full of stars, points of light I imagined visiting, meeting star creatures very similar to myself, who would bring me to a heaven my thoughts could only hint at. A kind of permanent Aurora Australis of pure light, colour and love, cocooning me forever.

This is a recurring dream. I'm sitting on a beach, waiting, along with lots of other people. It is cold, around dusk. We all sit, waiting for the Sunami. We wait calmly, accepting a fate we cannot change, though we know it will destroy us; the end of the world. Its shadow is off in the distance, and I shiver at its approach, as it takes up more and more of the light. The air is filled with mournful chanting; "Oooooommmmm", and the end is near, the wave moves closer, grows larger.

I've always been devout. Like my parents, reassured by a mindful, caring, just, but strict god who is interested in me, in my salvation. Back in Australia, I skipped blissfully past the rebellious adolescence of my peers, avoiding the rock 'n roll, cigarettes and womanising, secure in my convictions, early to class, early with my assignments, and graduating university two years before I was due. A hothouse flower, busy, like my mother, combining charity and humility with academic achievement. I was going into the church like my father. Theology; Latin, Ancient Greek, Scripture. All was pre-arranged. My life was a clear path before me. I had only to walk upon it. My father, absent most of the time on church business, was proud nonetheless, though he didn't show it much, fearing the development in me of Pride, the root of all other sins. My mother kept up the routine she had mastered in PNG, from sickbed to funeral; church dinner to bake stall. She didn't have to bother with me - I was one of the easy ones. Perhaps it was my youth. Maybe it was my innocence. There were things I didn't know. Something inside me hard, ugly, untouched, waiting for the right moment to destroy everything.

Have I mentioned Mary? She plays the church organ each week. Holy sounds come from her long thin fingers. Delicate, fair skin with just a hint of freckles, An innocent face. A simple life. She sits like an angel at the keyboard entertaining my flock. She is also my wife. The woman who keeps my house clean; my shirts ironed; who has dinner ready for me when I come home from work. Did I mention Sean and Liza, my two children? It was a good life really. I had all the things a man could want. A wife and kids. A job I truly believed in, which would ensure my salvation. Day after day, writing and preaching sermons, overseeing mission work from my office in Sydney where Mary and I lived. Sin was my favourite topic. I had a special sermon for each of the Seven Deadly Sins. Like my father, we tried to live a life of moderation. The children went to good schools. There were birthdays, school plays, piano lessons, the years flew by. We were happy. Of course we were. I wasn't looking for trouble.

We had one small vice. We went out for Indian food once a week. Thursday nights. Both of us followed a basic vegetarian diet, but there were usually enough dishes in our local restaurant to provide us with variety and sustenance. I knew, and preached, that gluttony was one of the worst sins, and that it could start with the enjoyment of food. Like my mother I tried to limit the excitement of my senses, but I couldn't help succumbing to the sweet smell of cardamoms, the heady sweaty cumin and coriander, the garlic, the ginger, the light crisp of the poppodums or the delicate melt in your mouth dahls. After a week's worth of rice, potatoes and nut meats, I found myself looking forward to my one indulgence with something more than just anticipation. It wasn't only the food. There was one waitress in particular, perhaps the daughter of the owner. I thought she must be since she was a little haughty in the way she took our order, or brought us new dishes without our asking. Something about the tiny bits of blue in her gold sari, brilliant spots of cobalt which reminded me of the birds of paradise of my original home. Her red lips seemed to be perpetually curled in a knowing smile. The mysteries of the East. A very soft, sensual look. Biting into a light crispy potato samosa, I felt as if I was sinking into her black eyes, falling down into a hole out of which I could never recover. A strange pulling pleasure, absorbing some of her power; Vedic ways. Sweets of sin. Masala Chai. After creamy mango kulfi and sticky halva, we would leave, full, bloated even, but for me, not quite satiated.

I was sitting on the sand. My hand was digging a hole. The hole began to fill with water, which started as a trickle. Then the water began to flow. Faster, filling the hole until the hole disappeared under the rising tide which covered the sand, my legs, my body. I was sinking under the water. Falling. Drowning. I awoke with a gargle, startling Mary out of her peaceful slumber.

"God is stern in dealing with the arrogant, but to the humble He shows kindness. - Proverbs 3:34. Hubris. Pride. The mother of all sins. We build up illusions about our strengths, our prowess, our capabilities. We are full of flaws. Truly small in the eyes of the lord. Our dreams, pathetic. Spiritual blindness. In front of god we lose our illusions. We must lose our illusions to see God". My flock was excited. They always were after a harsh sermon. Talking about the Sins really moved them afterwards. They gathered around. Wanting to touch me. Sea of hands. Diamond rings. Dressed in their weekly best. Clean. Shined shoes. Glowing skin. Showing themselves off. Committing each sin in turn. I show them a mirror and they thank me for it. I'm no better. Worse. A hypocrite. All of the sins are reflected in my heart. The ugliest sinner of them all. Who am I to talk?

I was researching for a book: The Seven Sins, a Modern Christian Primer. Something to provide understanding and help for combating the temptations of life. Something to meditate on for self-improvement. There were definitions for each Sin, and its opposite. There would be anecdotes, quotes from the Bible, from great saints, ways to incorporate clean living into a modern life. I wasn't exactly sure where it would go, but I knew the power, the familiarity, the impact of the sins on my parishioners. I knew that all of us were sinners after all. It takes constant work. Reminding. I was writing it more for myself than for others. It wasn't an easy book to work on. Many hours were spent in the library, researching the many sins of others; the history of sinning through the ages. Sin was a fascinating and rich, untouched topic and there was plenty of material to work through. I worked late. Nights. Didn't see much of Mary or the kids. My work was paramount. This was big. Critical. I needed the context for myself.

"Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God." - [Galatians 5:19-21](#)

I was working late when Mary came in. That pale clean face. A little tired looking. Wan. She never wore makeup. She was careful. Devout. She never questioned; never doubted. Took her faith for granted. The children were in bed. She always gave me space to work. My heavenly sermons. Her charities. Stairway to heaven. She put her hand on mine, silently, she was a quiet woman, and told me that she was worried. I had been remote. Unresponsive. The children felt my coldness. I told her that I was busy with my book, my work. Under a lot of pressure. I would soon be finished. It was nothing. Did she want to go out this week? I felt hungry. Nothing in the cupboard. Old mother hubbard.

We were strained. There was always a lot to do. My parish to run, missions to arrange, confessions to hear. Attending funerals. Weddings. The rituals of the blessed. I didn't see much of the children it is true. They had their friends, their schoolwork and I had my book. Mary was busy with her devotions too. Flowers for the church. Potlucks. Visiting the sick and needy. We had our routine, our rhythm. Our life. But sin was brewing in my heart. The worm was eating me from the inside. I started a slow fall.

She came to me in my dreams; nightmares. Black hair reaching down towards her ankles. Gold bangles on her snake arms. Kohl on her lids. Smell of Bhujia, cinnamon. I reached out for her. Witchcraft. Lilith. Lips sinking into rich spices. Ginger and cumin. I woke feeling sick.

"There is more than one kind of greed. There is greed for possessions, money, houses,

things to show off. There is greed for power, for strength, for honour. If we trust in the lord, we will not need to accumulate, always accumulate. We must simplify, divest, take nothing, focus on the eternal - the treasure waiting for us beyond this life".

I stopped eating out. I thought initially it was the spice. Overindulgence. Gluttony. A kind of indigestion. I could smell the spices coming out of my pores at night. I tried to stay awake, but as soon as I drifted off she would come. The woman in her blue sari. Nose ring. Dark skin. An eastern version of the women I used to feed from as a baby. Fevers. Sheets wet from sweat. "Michael. Are you alright?! Michael!" Mary's voice was a faint tug, pulling me back. She brought home tinctures; herbal teas, said her prayers, tried to be patient. I needed more than tea. I was becoming weaker. Satan was trying to get me; targeting me. One of his own. My pride was like a red flag to him. My greed was an invitation. "Michael!" I was moaning - pleasure mixed with agony.

"This can't go on. I want you to see my doctor". I went, just to please Mary. A large woman with iron grey hair and little sympathy. She prescribed a bland food diet, a range of pills to be taken daily and creams to rub on my neck and head.

"Gluttony is the desire for excess. Too much food, too much pleasure, too strong a desire for things, for sex, for beauty, for love, perfection, even for god. The only way to combat gluttony is to cut back. To slowly pare back on the addictive pull of pleasure until you no longer feel it."

I began to cut back on food altogether, feeling that the antidote to hunger was to eat less, that my illness was rooted in the carnal pleasures of diet. I spent long hours in prayer. Fasted for many days at a time. Disappeared on retreats which left my throat parched and head spinning. It didn't work. One day Mary came home from visiting the local retirement village to find me finishing a carton of ice cream, next to the freezer, lips blue, spoon in hand. Her shock and my shame hung in the air, their acrid smells competing with the sticky scent of vanilla, until I exploded in a fit of rage, breaking plates, banging my head against the wall, throwing cups, spoons, anything I could find. Red, bloated, wet with tears; red broken blood vessels in my eyes. This was my first fit; total loss of control, but it wasn't the last.

I hardly knew what started them. Anger, wrath. I pronounced judgement on everyone. Anything could set me off. My son's guitar left on the floor, a spot on the wall, fly in the room, music on the stereo, my daughter running freely in the yard. All open portals for Satan to sneak in. To rob us of the life of devotion we had created. I had to stay vigilante.

"Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" - [Matthew 5:22](#)

I began visiting the bottle shop for some whisky. I bought the cheapest I could find so I wouldn't take too much pleasure in it. Just a small nip to help me sleep at night. To keep the visions away. It worked at first, but when a single glass didn't work and I woke bathed in the evidence of my sinful heart, I started drinking doubles, then triples. I was never hungover, but the look in Mary's eyes as I dropped another empty bottle in the bin was like a black hole. Her freckles had disappeared and in their place was a dull pallor. I knew I was destroying her. Destroying my children's innocence. Drink settled me, kept me from raging uncontrollably against my family. The people I loved. Needed. Only perversely I was pushing them away. Pushing god away. No! God had pushed me away. Left me with a meaningless dread in place of the certainty I had once known.

I was alone on a beach. The wave was off in the distance. It was cold. I felt the cold deep inside of me. Then I was not alone. She came out of the darkness. The wave was her hair. Around her neck was a necklace of tiny skulls. They began to crumble, and with them her face started aging, the flesh thinning, until she was no more than a skeleton, and then her skull face began to crumble also, teeth falling. Her hair was spreading outwards like a curtain, washing over my face. Drowning me. I reached out to fight; to defend myself and

woke with my hands around Mary's neck, choking her. I let go and Mary looked at me with pure hatred, horror, disgust. I tried to explain but my words were garbled. Speaking in tongues. Devil nonsense.

"Can a man take fire to his bosom and his garments not be burned?" - Proverbs 6:27

"Lust is about more than just sex. It is the craving for physical pleasures of all kinds, for comfort, for good things, for materialism. There is lust for power, for revenge, for pleasure in all its forms."

I entered my son's bedroom the next day. He was listening to some music. A popular modern band. I knew, and said to myself as I walked in, this is normal. Lots of boys his age listen to this music, but he was just lying there, his face slack, and I saw the devil; I saw him. The devil was in the room, originating from the music he was playing, and although a part of me remained calm, watching, repeating gently that this music was just music, perhaps a little empty, devoid of value and taste, but just music all the same, another part of me, the outward part, seemed to crack. I could hear the snapping, twigs in the coldest part of winter - brittle on the edges of their branches.

I fought him. I fought the beast at every turn. At night he was lust and gluttony, leaving me desperate with hunger and thirst, his succubus torturing me. During the day he was wrath, an anger at myself which misdirected itself towards those in whose eyes I was reflected. He was everywhere and nowhere. In my children's toys, clothes, bookbags, in the crockery, the lightbulbs, mirrors, under my covers, a phantom insect buzzing in my ears until I was unable to hear. He was sloth, leaving me exhausted, unable to move, pinned to my bed with his heavy foot on my heart. He was pride, allowing me a few moments of freedom to believe I had conquered him, was actually able to live a life without god, before he returned with his foul sulphur smell and pointed fingernails. He was greed, as I hid my whisky, drinking deeper and wanting more even before I was finished. I had no idea of what day it was. I lost my parish and had no work to do and felt only envy, coveting what I once had, wanting my vocation back; the vocation of my neighbours, the devotion of my parishioners, who had long since stopped coming to my frenzied sermons.

Mary was crying as she packed her bags. A strange high pitched whine was coming from her mouth in a long stream. It sounded inhuman. I didn't know whether her pain was real, or another illusion created for me by the devil. Another trial. Always trials. The children had gone to their grandmother's: "you're no longer safe to be around"; "Refusing all help"; "Should be locked up"; sentences fell on the polished wood floor like marbles. I could hear the tinny ping as they hit. Some of the sentences bounced back up, hovering above us, dragonflies blooming into flowers. Mary's face was swollen. The door shut with a bang and the flowers crumbled and fell.

I could continue no longer. My family was gone. I had lost everything, sitting in my empty house, which would soon disappear too. I was earning no money and couldn't pay the mortgage. I no longer knew how to eat, to sleep. Basic function was gone, but in its place was an odd freedom. Nothing to lose. Nothing for the devil to take, and then, I knew. It came over me with the rising of the sun one morning. There was no devil. No god. The madness was my own. The Seven Deadly Sins were mine alone. Created by me, distorted by me, my self destruction. I lay outside on the overgrown lawn, looking at the stars above, imagining myself a boy again, wondering about the heaven beyond. There was no heaven, I knew now.

Some mystery remained though. I felt calm. My rage and madness had gone, probably temporarily, but for a moment I was still, even peaceful. I knew there was some truth under all this, something permanent, but not God. Not the religious father I had put in place of my own, but some wonder connected with the stars, the earth, the grassy smell coming from the lawn I lay on. I went inside and found some curry powder in the cupboard. I shook it onto my hand and licked it. A shiver ran through me. I knew this pain, this exquisite pain, this hunger

was a hunger for meaning, and realised with a start that the answer was in the family who had left, in the children who I had, like my own father and like the mythological father above, forsaken. I would reclaim them. I would take back my life. Take my dear Mary's hand and tell her all this. Tell her about the mystery of life. Cleanse her of the overbearing hatred and pain we've been living with for all of these years. I wanted to sing. My heart was light. I was in love again and the sunshine radiated off the roofs of the buildings and houses. We would finally live. Finally know love and joy. "Mary!" I yelled in my enthusiasm, "Sean!"; "Liza!" I was walking. I wanted to see the city - to see, to smell, to taste this world which I spent most of my life trying to escape. The main church was in high street. It was a beautiful old building undergoing renovation. You could climb the steps to a high point, step out of the door and see the entire city. It was a cold day. Autumn was just coming and the breeze lifted my hair slightly. I stood there for a minute, and then jumped.

*Brief Bio: Magdalena Ball runs The Compulsive Reader. She is the author of the poetry books Repulsion Thrust and Quark Soup, thenovel Sleep Before Evening, a nonfiction book The Art of Assessment, and, in collaboration with Carolyn Howard-Johnson, Blooming Red, Cherished Pulse, She Wore Emerald Then, and Imagining the Future. She also runs a radio show, The Compulsive Reader Talks. Find out more about Magdalena at <http://www.magdalenaball.com>*