

Broken Rose

Review

Stefan Vučak offers a strong dramatic sense in this novel with its bold and emotive dialogue, yet there's a subtle confidence to the narration in between these moments that grounds the story and never allows it to feel too over the top. This results in a layered, emotionally intelligent exploration of family pressures and personal freedom that readers from all walks of life will be able to relate to, especially Mason Adamov, looking for peace after such a turbulent relationship with the male role model in his life. It takes true talent to capture the tension between love and autonomy in such realistic terms, and also deliver a well-penned plot with lots of interest, and a capable, strong central hero who can be vulnerable and open but still be a man we admire and root for. *Broken Rose* is a relatable and mature drama about carving a path through complicated relationships. Highly recommended to fans of well-penned dramas.

Readers' Favorite

Books by Stefan Vučak

General Fiction:

Cry of Eagles

All the Evils

Towers of Darkness

Strike for Honor

Proportional Response

Legitimate Power

Autumn Leaves

F/X-26

28th Amendment

Night Sirens

Broken Rose

Science Fiction:

Fulfillment

Lifeliners

All My Sunsets

Shadow Gods Saga:

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper from Shadow

Shadow Masters

Immortal in Shadow

With Shadow and Thunder

Through the Valley of Shadow

Guardians of Shadow

Non-Fiction:

Writing Tips for Authors

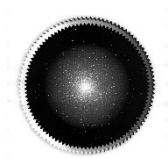
Contact at:

www.stefanvucak.com

Broken Rose

By

Stefan Vučak



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Note:

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

Copyright: Stefan Vučak ©2025

ISBN-13: 9780645116397

Dedication

To those who think writing is an end in itself

Acknowledgments

To Kelly Smith for additional proofreading and insightful suggestions.

Partners in Crime Book Services

<https://partnersincrimebooks.wixsite.com/authorservices>

Note: National Post is a fictional organization and not a real body.

Cover art by Laura Shinn.

<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

Chapter One

Mason laid down his knife and fork on the heavy green tablecloth, the crumbed veal and fries before him forgotten. The glare he gave the imposing figure of his father across the table would shrivel anyone else, but not the granite personality of his old man who stared at him with open disdain.

“One word of encouragement, that’s all I ever wanted, but you couldn’t bring yourself to give me even that little bit! Did I ask for too much? In your eyes, did I even have the right to expect anything from you? Instead of giving me that one word, you always found fault with everything I did.” Throat suddenly tight, he slowly wagged his head as shards of regret and disappointment crumbled around him to vanish as though they never existed. As though he never existed.

“I never understood what it took to please you,” Mason added bitterly, hating to spoil what started as a great evening to engender some closeness with his parents. At least pretend it was there; a façade everybody felt comfortable with, reluctant to face reality. Well, he faced it now. “What does it take, Dad?”

He did not want to have it dished out to him anymore in silence, nor maintain a hollow presence of congeniality every time they met that belied genuine discomfort and tension. It took too much out of him and he had precious little left to give. He needed what remained to maintain some scrap of dignity and self-respect. The possibility of an eventual confrontation with his father always cast a dark shadow over what should otherwise be bright days. To maintain a semblance of family peace, he always pushed back facing the inevitable moment. He could no longer pay the

price, or wanted to.

His mom blanched, green eyes large with astonishment, brushed a blond streak along the right side of her flowing hazel hair, and cleared her throat.

“Now, Manny—”

“Don’t ‘Now, Manny’ me, Mom!” Mason shot back with a withering glance, tired of the whole thing. “Every time you think I’m wrong, and it’s mostly always, you side with Dad! Did you ever really love me, Mom?”

Brianna turned white and gaped.

He shoved the chair back and threw the maroon cloth napkin on the table. “I’ve had it with both of you. If you can’t accept me for what I am, then don’t accept me at all. You’ve been doing it long enough already. I need some fresh air.”

“Sit down!” Nikola Adamov grated in a stern Navy voice. Twenty-seven years since he resigned as a lieutenant commander in the Navy, he still retained command presence. A terrible shadow that hung over both of them. Not a shadow perhaps, but an insurmountable wall.

Even as a kid, Mason found his father’s uncompromising personality difficult to cope with. When his father came into a room, he dominated by mere presence, and his words were law, precluding argument or dissent, something Mason silently rebelled against. He should have stood up to him years ago. It would have made his life easier. Or at least drawn behavioral boundaries in an armed truce. After all, he inherited *some* of his old man’s genes, but the raw power his dad projected always held him in check, all for the sake to maintain a fictitious peace.

Mouth tight, fists clenched to hold back a torrent of emotions he kept bottled far too long, wanting to let them vent in unbridled rage, he lowered himself onto the edge of the chair, back straight, openly hostile, not in a mood for another personality dissection, which he had many already. He should walk out to regain some personal perspective, unencumbered by his parents’ patronizing

Broken Rose

blanket of condescension, unstated superiority, and self-righteousness.

Nikola dabbed his full lips, neatly folded the napkin beside the plate in a habitual gesture, and settled back his muscled 174cm frame. Black eyes probed Mason beneath dark eyebrows not touched with frost. His short-cropped hair still a lustrous brown. A powerful man with a daunting stance even when sitting relaxed, his look now bore thunder clouds. Mason waited, determined not to be unnerved, regardless of what happened.

“You claim I never gave you a word of encouragement?” his dad rasped in a dangerously soft voice.

Mom laid a soothing palm on her husband’s forearm. “This isn’t the time, dear. Let’s not ruin—”

Nikola shook her off. “It must be said, damn it!” He focused his gaze on Mason. “Who pushed you through high school? You were ready to enter university at fourteen if not for our tight-assed academics and their rigid curriculum. Nevertheless, at eighteen, you managed to get a BSc and a master’s in a three-year accelerated course, which landed you a choice job with the ANZ bank. Bully for you. However, none of it would have happened if I hadn’t kicked your lazy butt out of the comfort zone you hid yourself because you figured you were too damn smart and arrogant to study. You’d be a deluded bum now if I hadn’t been on your case, blaming everybody for your problems except yourself.”

“Lucky me,” Mason muttered.

“That’s right. Lucky you. You *are* smart, I’ll admit, but even in grade school, you became dazzled by your genius and set yourself up to fail. You didn’t need encouragement. You needed a spike up your ass to get you moving, which I gave you in spades.”

“So you pushed me through school, but you did it with a whip, not the support and care I wanted!”

His dad scowled. “Support and care? I supported you in the only way you’d take it, you ungrateful, conceited shit! You started

work and sponged off us for more than a year before you bought yourself that seedy St. Kilda bedsitter dump and move out.”

“And you never let me forget it!”

“A dump, like I said. Before you left, you didn’t pay us a single cent in rent while your mother washed and ironed your clothes and fed you. You never appreciated how we worried and cared for you, and you haven’t changed one bit. Still a self-centered, churlish asshole.”

“So she washed my clothes,” Mason retorted in a clipped voice, face hot with indignation at the unfairness of it all. They never cared to listen to his side of things. The evening ruined, he prepared to give it to them now, his relationship already a crumbled ruin. “That’s been her job from the day I was born, and everything else you could do for me! I didn’t owe either of you any rent. You owed me all you had when you brought me into this crappy world. You now expect me to pay for that as some sort of gratitude debt? A salve for your conscience?” He leaned forward and stared into his father’s hard eyes. “I only wanted a hint of approval for things I did, a modicum of affection, an occasional hug, but you only had words of derision and displeasure. Your version of care, I suppose.”

“Manny!” Brianna gaped in horror. “That’s so cruel and untrue.”

“Is it, Mom?” Mason pointed a finger at his dad. “At five, I remember him in his Navy blues when not boating somewhere in the Arabian Gulf or wherever. When he came home on leave, I saw a stranger in a pretty uniform, not a father. I wanted so much to be close to him and do things with him. A few moments of closeness and attention would have been enough, but even then, he showed me scant consideration. When he left on another cruise, I listened to you cry at night and wondered why he didn’t care for us. Why didn’t he care, Mom?”

Nikola shot his wife a startled look.

“Then he left the Navy. To make it up to us? Nothing

Broken Rose

changed, though. During his years at Thompson Engineering, he only had time for work. On weekends when I wanted to do fun things with him like other boys, he couldn't be bothered. You don't know how much that hurt. After your miscarriage in '93, I became an irritant to him—to both of you. Someone to be tolerated, ordered around, one of his underlings, not a son to be loved."

His dad pursed his mouth, placed both hands on the table, and pushed himself up.

"You thankless wretch! I should bash your head in for that! You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Then do it!" Mason shot back, not giving a damn anymore, his past collapsing to ashes around him. It had to happen eventually. "Throw me in the brig. It's your style. Your way or no way."

"One day, you'll come to value what your mother and I did for you. Sadly, tonight isn't that night. You better leave before we both say something we'll regret, you most of all. What's more, you have a wrong slant on almost everything."

"With you, I always had a wrong slant on everything."

"Your mother and I raised you to be what you are today, but despite your brains, you're too thick and full of yourself to see it." Nikola pointed at the door. "Get your ass out of here before I throw you out. Get out! Get out!"

Mason's grandmother strode into the dining room and beamed. "That cleared my head," she declared cheerfully, referring to a hasty bathroom visit. Her smile faded, replaced by a puzzled frown at the tense tableau before her, and glanced at her son. "What's going on? What's all the shouting about?"

Rigid with anger, Nikola merely glared.

"Thanks for the dinner, Mom," Mason choked, voice thick with emotion, intensely disliking what transpired, and gave Grandma a nod. "Talk to you later."

On a weekend visit from the nursing home, when he came tonight, he looked forward to spending some quality time with her. Regrettably, life dished out one of its disappointments instead. That's all he'd been getting from his family. He promised himself to visit her next weekend and explain everything. Provided he first explained everything to himself, he mused sardonically, too churned up inside to think straight. Or wanted to think at all.

"Manny! Don't do this!" his mother cried out, her sobs cut when he slammed the door shut.

He looked for a confrontation, but did not expect it to be so acerbic and acrimonious. Worse still, many things he sought to unload remained unsaid. Perhaps just as well. He may have pushed things beyond any possibility of reconciliation. Could there be a reconciliation? The look of contempt his father gave him as he left made him doubt.

A glittering half-moon shone bright against a backdrop of a few stars he could see not overwhelmed by city lights. He winced as a brisk southerly cut through his thin wool turtleneck. July in Melbourne strictly for the penguins. He hurried to his new Subaru Forester, climbed in, his thoughts in churning disarray, and slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

"Skits!"

A deep breath later, wanting to rage and lash out at anything and everything, he eased down Powell Street.

To hell with them all!

That's what started it, talking about the damned car. Instead of being pleased that Mason finally got rid of his old, but still reliable, Holden Apollo, his dad admonished him for not getting something like a BMW that holds its market and resale value. Once again, Nikola twisted things and left Mason with a foul taste in his mouth, feeling inadequate, incapable of decision, a failure, always at fault. Nothing he did was ever good enough for the man.

Broken Rose

Not fair! Screw you, Dad!

He accelerated down Powell Street lined with old elms, winter branches bare, braked at the Toorak Road intersection, checked for oncoming traffic, and turned onto the broad boulevard. The house he left now only a shell of cold memories. Some bitter, some sweet, mostly faded dreams. Heart heavy, he swallowed something that stuck in his throat and it went down hard.

Not fair!

A short run along the always busy Kings Way, city skyscrapers a dazzling background, he turned left onto Cobden Street and made his way down the quiet, narrow, dimly lit tree-lined lane filled with residents-only cars. On occasion, an enterprising individual parked illegally in someone's spot to the irate reaction from the house owner, which more often than not resulted in the offending vehicle getting towed away. To stop illegal parking in his two invaluable spots, he allowed neighbors on either side of the street to use them. Both reciprocated with a bottle of wine or slab of beer at times. Good for a hello, Mason did not socialize much with either of them, content to live in his own private world. He simply did not fit the mold of an over-the-fence gregarious talker. An ingrained habit from his often lonely childhood days? A lot of truth in that, he admitted.

Not inclined to gnaw on it right then, Mason drove into the small garage of his double-story place, paused as the evening's events replayed in his mind, and got out. A sharp breeze coming off the Bay tugged at his sweater and he hurried toward the laundry entrance, the garage door rumbling as it slithered down. A welcome wave of warmth greeted him as he stepped into the open-plan kitchen/lounge, the spaces kept warm by the central heating system.

He dug out his cell and placed it on the glass-topped coffee table. Glowing blue numbers said 8:15pm, July 23, 2022. Too early for bed, not in the mood to watch TV or a DVD, he loaded the player with Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusic*, fixed himself a

double bourbon, sprawled onto a dark brown leather incliner, and closed his eyes. It did not blot out the images in his mind. They merely became sharper.

After a moment, he raised the tumbler in a salute. "He's to you, Dad, for all the transgressions I made, even though I never knew what they were. Not that I really give a shit anymore."

Despite the moving music playing with his heartstrings and emotions, by any measure, not his best evening. The weight he felt lay heavy on his chest.

"I need you right now, Gramps," Mason muttered forlornly, took a sip of bourbon, and allowed his mind to freewheel, determined to get a little tight. The words he and Dad exchanged kept replaying and put a serious dampener on Mozart's serenade. The price he paid for having an eidetic memory.

He wasn't a failure. At thirty-one, a modern-looking double terrace in South Melbourne an easy walk to the city center, nice investment portfolio, satisfying new job—he hoped it would be satisfying—he had everything others may envy and the world for him should be in lights. The one thing missing in his otherwise perfect life—parental love. Something he craved since childhood and never really had, not even from his mother. A bleak realization he harbored for a long time, but hesitated to acknowledge and face fully. He could rationalize it by admitting his dad spent all his time in the Navy, unable to provide the kind of companionship other fathers lavished on their kids when he did show up on infrequent leave. His mother held a demanding teaching job at RMIT University, which left little time to frolic with Mason when she came home, busy making dinner and taking care of necessary household chores. When a free moment did come, she wanted to unwind a little, not chase a football in the park. He understood it all now, armed with years of knowledge, but not as a pre-teen kid. All he knew then, there were many lonely days in grade school, and lonelier evenings at home afterward. To compensate, he lost himself in games of his own making, craving a

Broken Rose

smile every now and then from Mom, an endearing peck on the cheek, and a hearty slap of bonding on the back from Dad. Unable to phrase it in those terms at the time, he wanted his parents to fill a yearning for closeness inside him they left empty for some reason. What always bothered him, they never explained why. He needed from them what they rarely gave and he resented them for it.

Experts at psychological warfare, they never lost an opportunity to remind him what they did for him, the sacrifices they made so he could make something of himself in life. A crushing burden they bore with suffering stoicism for him, they said. They now expected him to kiss their feet in gratitude, be a good little boy, and don't question. Forget the hurt they inflicted on him, all for his own good. Classic guilt transference, perhaps done unconsciously, he allowed. Consciously or not, they kept doing it, and were clearly still at it.

His analytical mind tossed over his father's words. Did he have a wrong slant on things? His eidetic memory recorded everything in excruciating detail, but did not scrutinize or give him unbiased introspection. Whatever that meant. He learned those things later through research and life's hard knocks, which gave him a modicum of wisdom and an ability to cope. Too bad no manual existed on how to handle parents. Popular books and academic papers aplenty, but all offered hollow platitudes or high-brow philosophizing of little practical value he could use.

Why did things have to be so damn hard? With all his smarts, he still could not figure it out. Well, he could...now, sort of. It did not help, though.

Tonight's spat failed to resolve anything fundamental, he admitted, except widen the deep schism with his father that's been there for years. His old man wasn't an old-fashioned dummy incapable of dealing with modern issues and lifestyle challenges. Far from it. Mason accepted that most of his smarts came from him. Mom supplied his more artistic, emotional attributes. When

much younger, he recalled many vigorous discussions with his dad on geopolitics, social extremism, religious polarization, cosmology, and other things. Both shared a passion for the universe and its unfathomable wonders. Sadly, those moments happened all too infrequently, and over the last few years, none after Mason graduated, refusing to pursue a PhD urged by his course advisor. The narrow academic world view held little appeal. He wanted to do things, make something happen, not study, and embarked on a business career.

Eighteen months later, he moved into his St. Kilda apartment, relieved not to have his parents underfoot, or live under a prevailing cloud of gloom that hung over their house. He immersed himself in work, thinking he no longer needed what they never gave him anyway. He did not cut himself off totally, and saw his parents and grandparents over dinner sometimes, celebrated Easter and Christmas as a social custom rather than from any genuine religious conviction none of them really felt, and chatted with Mom on the phone when not lecturing...and he did all the calling. A tenuous web that over the years became more tenuous. Mason realized early if he did not do something and soon, that web would not be strong enough to hold them together. Despite all the problems, he wanted to be close to his parents. Nothing else left in his life by way of family. What happened tonight did not help.

Perhaps he should swallow his wounded pride and chuck all the emotional baggage he carried most of his life and accept the fact that his parents were not perfect. The rational part of him agreed. He probably harbored a few cracks himself, he mused, the admission not difficult to make. Find common ground and go from there? Be the first to extend a hand and move on? Why should *he* be the one to always knuckle under? They never showed any inclination to meet him halfway. Life on their terms or nothing. He did not want it on their terms, though. No longer.

Pride...what a bitch!

Broken Rose

A man needed *some* pride. Otherwise, he'd be a submissive mat for everybody to trample, and he'd been one long enough. Did he equate pride with self-respect?

Decide who you are and what you really want.

Right then, feelings warring with each other, he did not care to examine them too deeply. He desperately wanted to unburden himself to Gramps. Tragically, Milan died five years ago from a ruptured brain aneurysm nobody knew he had. At least it happened quickly and he didn't suffer. One moment, he laughed with Grandma over breakfast, then dropped dead at the table. Gramps understood how to handle his son. Too bad he hadn't passed that knowledge to Mason. Or had he?

He felt his mouth twitch as he fondly reflected on the fun times he had with his grandfather. Happy times, happy memories.

Snug in their Mt. Macedon cottage some seventy-five kilometers north-west from Melbourne, summer or winter—well, not always in summer—Milan usually stoked up the wood burner in the evening and watched the dancing, flickering flames with Grandma at his side, sip fine Shiraz, and suck on an old briar pipe stuffed with cherry or rum-flavored tobacco. Nada would be all over his case if he tried to smoke indoors, he told Mason more than once. Grumpy and resentful at the injustice of it all—he deserved his little pleasures, he always snapped—he contented himself by chewing the stem. Mason once bought him an expensive meerschaum pipe as a Christmas gift, but the old geezer preferred his worn briar. No accounting for taste.

On winter weekends, the landscape covered with a blanket of fresh snow or glittering frost, Gramps cooked *gluhwein* using Grandma's favorite recipe she picked up from her own mom back in Zagreb. A different, now forgotten world. A nostalgic, and on reflection, perhaps happier world, she would say in a pensive moment, not actually meaning it. They had it tough in old Yugoslavia and never considered returning, having made a new

life for themselves in Australia. Gramps often grouched that behind the appearance of freedom after the fall of the old regime, the new Croatia turned out to be equally corrupt and repressive. Those in power were the same old communist clique parading themselves under a veneer of democracy. Business as usual and screw the people.

At other times, politics forgotten, he and Mason drank warm *slivovitz*. The plum brandy radiated inner fire that reflected the flames in the burner and laid the foundation for deeper discussions, both skirting subjects damaging to inner peace. An educated, worldly man, Gramps had a driving thirst for knowledge, questioned everything with a cynical slant, and laughed heartily at local and international political shenanigans. Either that or worry himself to death, he said. They had fun times, all right.

Milan liked to sit back in his favorite black leather recliner positioned in front of the burner, nod as random thoughts cascaded through the corridors of his mind, and talked about days long gone. He'd reminisce on his wild youth in Varazdin, the turbulent war years as a partisan, how he met Nada, the struggle to create a new life when they emigrated to Australia, and of many other things. The old man possessed a rich past packed with unusual experiences and an uncompromising, down-to-earth attitude to life.

'Keep things simple and in perspective, moj mali stroj,' he'd say. *'Don't get sidetracked with irrelevancy.'*

"Not always easy to do, Gramps," Mason reflected pensively.

Mali stroj—little gadget in Croatian. He remembered Gramps calling him that forever.

After exhausting himself running wild around the small Mt. Macedon village during a weekend visit, then scolded by Mom for getting himself dirty, he welcomed a mug of hot cocoa and fresh blueberry cookies Grandma made. On sunny, warm afternoons, he'd sit on the back veranda; listen to Gramps and Dad talk, sometimes heatedly on a point of contention, and watch two

Broken Rose

resident magpies peck around the backyard. If Cricket, Grandma's black tomcat saw them, he immediately pounced on the birds, which resulted in squawks of indignation as they flew to perch on a nearby gumtree branch. He often wondered if his grandfather made up those stories, as they sounded too outlandish to be believable. During a drive home once, he asked Dad about it. His father smiled indulgently and assured him that Milan lived in colorful times, with a little hyperbole thrown in perhaps for drama and color, he'd add.

Mozart faded and silence took over the room. He sipped his bourbon as random thoughts tumbled in his mind. Alone in the thick silence, the emptiness he now felt threatened to overwhelm him. He lost Gramps, and now, it looked like he lost his father.

Unaccountably, Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence* bubbled up from the chaos within and he hummed the tune.

Right then, it seemed kind of fitting.

He got up and poured himself more whiskey.

* * *

The tires whispered to themselves, a sound of hissing rain.

Beads on a string, cars moved along the highway. Although early, the hard white sun valiantly tried to warm the frozen, rolling landscape and burn away stringy remnants of clinging mist. With shrill squawks, a gaggle of yellow-crested cockatoos flew overhead and settled on massive eucalypt trees beside the carriageway.

Mason adjusted his shades, switched stations to ABC FM Classic, and nodded solemnly to the hypnotic rhythm of Ravel's *Bolero*. Not into heavy symphonies, he liked his music light and cheerful. *Bolero's* enchanting tempo sent his mind along meandering memory paths. Opera made him wince, but in a quirky way, his heart sang to some of its music. His mom always tuned into

60s and 70s popular stuff, and he inherited her tastes for the old-ies. Modern, sharp, acid compositions made him switch stations. When nothing came up on the radio, he replayed favorites stored in his mind.

A silver hatchback roared past him. The decibels of its speakers rivaled an A380 taking off, guaranteed to blow out the driver's eardrums. He shook his head, not understanding any of it.

A green signboard on the shoulder said Mt. Macedon exit, one kilometer. *Bolero* finished in a crescendo and the familiar ABC news break broke his reflective reverie.

Virginia Trioli came on to present Saturday's *News Breakfast* in her cheerful, bubbly voice that nonetheless failed to soften what she said. He paid scant attention, noting the main points.

The Greens Party pushing Labor to shut down coal and gas-powered electricity generators. The rub, no renewables existed to take up the load deficit. Mason shook his head at the stupidity of it all. People across Australia protesting against rampant price gouging by Woolworths and Coles supermarket chains. House and rental costs soaring across the country. The draconian Covid restrictions almost gone, with dictator Dan Andrews at the helm of the Victorian Labor government, no one could say what that man would do next to ruin the state. On the other side of the globe, Russian forces were mauling Ukraine's cities and eastern positions as US and EU sanctions began to bite. Israel launched missile strikes against Hamas strongholds in Gaza. Mason sighed and shook his head.

His dose of doom and gloom done, he pushed a stiff finger at the display screen and switched off the radio. Peaceful silence descended, broken only by the soft engine hum.

He kept a close eye on local and international politics, world trade, environmental issues, and scientific developments. Like a junky, he had to have a regular news fix. Sometimes, he felt as though everything crowded him, stifling his ability to think, smothering him with the worst the world had to offer. He often

Broken Rose

wondered why nobody reported nice, cheerful things, already knowing the answer. People simply loved to wallow in someone else's misery, convincing themselves their misery wasn't as bad. It helped them cope with their days.

Last night, two double bourbons warm in his belly, still unsettled, he wanted to jump into the car and rush off to his grandparents' place. The Mt. Macedon property now his, but from earliest childhood, he always considered it a fixture with them in it, and he a welcomed visitor, although a rumbustious neighborhood terror let loose from an otherwise strict home discipline. They were a permanency he relied on. He missed that connection.

If he could not talk to Gramps, Mason needed his ghost to help him sort out conflicting feelings stirring inside him. Last night, tempted to find refuge and solace in the clean, unspoiled Macedon hills, he resisted giving into the impulse. Cops usually prowled the roads, especially on Fridays, and he did not fancy getting nabbed for being over the alcohol limit, which he probably pushed after the drinks he had.

Past Gisborne, he took the off-ramp onto Mt. Macedon Road and motored down the peaceful arterial. Sheets of mist hung low over paddocks and the sun glinted between white-barked eucalypt branches. Frost painted the grass with crystal on both sides of the road, and the airconditioner whined a little louder to maintain the set temperature.

Before the hill that led into the small township, the local golf course clubhouse stood deserted, although he figured it would fill rapidly with weekend warriors who sought to test their skill against the devilish white ball. Mason liked the small nine-hole course and played when he could tear himself away from the city. Preferably early in the morning during the week when he often had the place to himself, everybody else otherwise at work.

He slowed to sixty, drove past a cluster of old-fashioned houses and stores, and turned right onto the narrow, sleepy Cheniston Road lined with bushy trees and tall gums, providing

shade and tranquility. Cottages and larger, more modern houses nestled on mostly half-hectare lots occupied by old-time residents and newly arrived retirees who sought to escape the city pressure cooker. Some owners used larger plots as do-it-yourself hobby farms or held them as investments. Looking at it all, his mood improved as the prevailing sense of peace descended on him. The place did it to him every time.

Mason pulled up before a two-meter steel gate hung on local bluestone columns and gazed with nostalgia at the single-story sandstone dwelling. A chicken wire fence ran around the entire property and gave an uninterrupted view of gently rolling hills falling away behind the house to merge into flatland. On either side, tall pines provided shelter from the neighbors. At nights, lying in bed, window wide open, he always listened as the pines softly whispered to him until everything faded and he slept. During a storm, the sounds were more agitated—hissing surf running up a beach—but they too soothed away the day's cares.

He opened the gate expecting Cricket to come bounding toward him in welcome, tail held high. His dad disliked cats and never kept pets, a characteristic Mason shared. In a quirky way, Cricket nonetheless warmed to them and often rubbed himself against their legs as they sat on the veranda, purring loudly with satisfaction, knowing he left a bunch of hairs on their trousers. The black tomcat only a fond memory now among other memories tucked away in his memory drawers.

Then, on May 5, 2017, over breakfast, Milan Adamović died at ninety-four from a massive stroke. A loss Mason felt keenly, as Gramps' death ripped out one of his life anchors. Grandma had him cremated at Altona Memorial Park and buried the brass urn in a back corner of the property. Nikola planted a miniature pencil cypress sapling to commemorate the spot.

Understandably enough, Grandma took the loss hard. Dad immediately offered to move her to their place in South Yarra in town, not wanting Mom to live alone. A feisty, independent

Broken Rose

woman, Nada put up a fight, saying she didn't want to live in a crowded, smelly city. She had local friends for company, kept busy doing community work, and looking after the property. At eighty-nine, a burdensome task, Nikola pointed out reasonably. Having friends did not make up for some lonely days and empty nights. What if something happened to her and nobody around to help? If she didn't move, he insisted she wear an emergency bracelet, not a solution he liked and an idea she detested. Dad gave her an ultimatum: bracelet or the city. In the end, she accepted the inevitable and wore a bracelet.

Mason walked around in denial for a week, hoping to wake from a terrible nightmare, and Gramps would still be there, puffing away on his briar, cracking stories. Impossible that he was gone. No more chats, no more stories, no companionship. Mason somehow took it that Gramps would be there forever. All he had left were treasured memories he could replay over and over. It would have to suffice.

Three weeks later, Cricket vanished.

The double loss took a heavy emotional toll on Grandma, and a better part of a year passed before she became her more normal self. Mason officially took over the place and came up often to help with the chores. Either by himself to enjoy a weekend, or with one or more of his three closest buddies. He knew beforehand he'd own the property one day, but had not figured to inherit so quickly.

By then, it became obvious that Grandma could no longer look after herself or the property, and Dad took her to South Yarra. He and Brianna made a valiant effort to care for her, but twelve months later, everybody admitted it would not work, and they moved her into a nursing home, as Mom did not want to quit her job and become a permanent caretaker. Initially grumpy at another move, Nada gradually accepted the necessity and soon made new friends. Mason and his parents visited often and had

her at their South Yarra place on most weekends to keep a connection everybody wanted. His parents sought to have Nada with them always, Mason had to give them that, but Grandma needed professional care, something Mom could not provide. They all made it up to her by taking her to Mt. Macedon whenever she wanted to reconnect with Milan and old friends.

Mason parked the car in front of the double garage and strode up broad sandstone steps to the solid wood doorway. He winced at the chill inside as he disabled the alarm, then busied himself to fire up the wood burner. Chore done, he went to the bathroom to wash up. He put aside the towel and stared at the 176cm slim figure in the mirror. Muddy green eyes inherited from Mom gazed back at him above a square jawline and nicely tapered nose. He passed a hand through charcoal hair and a lighter streak that ran along the top of his head and pursed his lips. The streak came in for lots of jibes in primary and secondary school, which forced him to fend off a bully or two. In the kitchen, coffee percolator going, he checked the fridge. Apart from bread and milk, no need for a major shopping outing.

Buttery sunshine streamed through tall back veranda windows and made a bright pool on the polished redgum floor. A gaggle of white cockatoos in the yard pecked around the small vegetable garden. He always planted potatoes, onions, carrots, tomatoes, cabbages, and some herbs, preferring genuine flavor in vegetables he ate. Over the last four years, the garden shrank as his interest to maintain it diminished, and overseas work commitments prevented him from coming up. His parents looked after the place while he worked in the Middle East, something he reluctantly agreed they had to do, but a chore he did not want to burden them with. An idyllic weekend retreat, the property still required regular maintenance. He always cleaned during a visit, and a local man took care of mowing and trimming. It all mounted up, though, when he added council rates and utility charges, and none of it tax deductible. More than once, he thought of selling,

Broken Rose

but could not bring himself to do it while Grandma lived, and he did not want to rent it out. She may consider it betrayal, seeing how much of her life she and Gramps spent here.

A mug of hot coffee in hand, Mason slid back the lounge ceiling-high glass panel and stepped into the enclosed veranda now warm from the sun. He dragged over a chair, back and seat made comfortable with tied-on cushions Grandma made, and placed the mug on the heavy table. He pulled out a mild King Edward cigar from his breast pocket and lit up. A couple of satisfying puffs later, he gazed absently into nothing in particular. He never smoked cigarettes, although as a kid, he and his friends tried them for taste. Not for him. He did not like the stink, but enjoyed the aromatic whiff of a cigar.

The cockatoos looked up from their chore when he emerged and went back to teasing the ground. His eyes drifted past the back fence toward patches of old-growth forest and rested on a distant horizon where the air turned fuzzy. Melbourne lay somewhere over there. He could not see it, too far away, but easily pictured its cluster of skyscrapers clawing upward. Another life, another existence.

As his thoughts tumbled, he imagined Gramps sitting on the other side of the table as he often did, old briar clenched between his teeth, bushy eyebrows drawn together in a frown. Mason lifted his mug in acknowledgment.

"We need to talk, Gramps," he murmured, then grinned. If someone saw him right then, they'd be right to consider him ready for the funny wagon. No one could see him, of course, and he did not give a damn if somebody did.

"I screwed things up properly last night, haven't I?"

A rhetorical question, as Gramps couldn't answer anyhow. Still, he did drive here to get some answers. Lay it all on the table, pick through the family pieces, and see what picture they made? Instead of losing himself in nostalgia, feeling sorry for himself, he should go back to South Melbourne and attend to real chores.

They would not get done by themselves, and he started work on Monday. A new start with Global Systems after five years with Deloitte.

A magpie swooped over the cockatoo gaggle and they took flight, screeching in protest as they wheeled toward a stand of trees down the hill.

Perhaps he should latch on the trailer and drive off into the bush to look for fallen logs to top up his supply of firewood. Most easy to get at stuff already taken years ago, but lots still remained along lonely forest tracks. Physical work may clear his head and make him forget reality for a while. He took a sip of coffee and decided not to get sweaty. The back shed held enough chopped dry wood to last the winter, and two five-meter-long shoulder-high stacks would see him through at least eight more years. *Keep today's visit focused and intellectual*, he told himself.

As a teenager, he liked going into the forest with Gramps to cut timber and haul the plunder home. He enjoyed the earthy forest smells—something different from the usual city odors—listen to the whisper of rustling leaves and the cradling comfort the woods engendered. When he first started work and got a car, an old secondhand Honda hatch, he'd drive up in casual gear and got friendly ribbing from Gramps for looking like a bum. Mason shrugged off the japes.

"I'm in a white shirt, a strangulation tie, and suit five days a week," he'd retort, not taking umbrage. "On weekends, I don't care if I look like a bum." And he did not, although he did not *actually* look like a bum.

Warm air drifted in from the lounge as the burner got into its stride. He relaxed and allowed himself to drift into retrospection, home chores be damned. Mt. Macedon's outback retreat promulgated an atmosphere of tranquility and peace. A far cry from the hectic city lifestyle he lived during the week. The city and work provided the means through which he secured his ongoing financial and retirement needs, but did not fill his soul in the way

Broken Rose

Gramp's place did. A job simply fulfilled his economic needs. Well, it did far more than that, he acknowledged grudgingly. People who lived here had their share of problems, everybody did everywhere, and Grandma loved to share local gossip about someone's misfortune, social or financial, but they seemed to take life's knocks with a more phlegmatic, philosophical attitude, and smiled readily. If he could somehow instill such an outlook in the city, he'd make a fortune, and along the way push a lot of psychiatrists on the street. Not a bad thing, perhaps, he mused.

Still in grade school, his mom or dad often dropped him off on a Friday evening or Saturday morning to leave him with his grandparents for the weekend. Under loose discipline, Mason ran wild, free from constraints life in suburban South Yarra imposed. He had the nearby Fawkner Park to romp around in, but it wasn't the same thing as real countryside.

Alone or with several local youngsters he came to know, they roamed through open fields and patches of forest pretending to be explorers in African deeps, played war, or chased Indians. Cowboy games were always fun. They all liked to meander through tall corn unseen and pick wild red poppies in their play. When ripe, Grandma boiled or barbecued corn cobs, then smeared them with golden butter. They ate with relish, washed down with hot tea and cookies for dessert.

He disappeared in the morning, showed up for lunch to stoke up with fuel, and be gone the rest of the day until weariness and hunger forced him back. Grandma tended to his scratches and scolded him when he got his clothes dirty or torn, but the words held no sting, unlike what his mother said when she came to pick him up. Mason preferred to forget those moments and the smacks on the rear end for his misdeeds. Small penance for the fun he had.

Mason recalled an emotionally bumpy and often lonely childhood. Early on, he discovered his eidetic memory. At first, he thought everybody had it, but as he listened to his parents and

other people, the realization he might be different came as a shock, mixed with wonder at possibilities the ability opened for him. As he began to understand words and articulate, comprehend what he saw on TV, his intellectual horizons expanded exponentially. Shortly, it became clear to everybody that he picked up things far more rapidly than a normal ten-month toddler did. The transition from crawling to walking stimulated his insatiable curiosity, which undoubtedly added to his parents' growing collection of gray hairs.

The picture books they got for him opened a window to more marvels, but he found their simplistic formats boring. Around three, at the RMIT faculty Childhood Center, he became fascinated with the printed word and demanded real books designed for far older children. A lecturer in English at the University, having him there relieved his mom from many worries where to put him, not wanting to damage her career by taking extended leave. The Center teachers recognized his budding intellect and slotted him into an accelerated learning class.

Way above average smart had its good points, but also created a social barrier with less gifted classmates and children in general. He often found himself alone, by choice when he refused to join in their boisterous play, or shunned because they saw him as someone odd, then teased him for being a bookworm. He found early that children were very cruel. Perhaps straightforward and unpretentious would be a better way of putting it. Either way, he did not like those bullying episodes. His teachers protected him from the worst of it, but rejection forced him to build a defensive shield against barbs that came his way much earlier in life than normally happened.

His dad still in the Navy then, was not around to help him and be someone Mason could lean on for emotional support. Busy lecturing and taking care of the house, Mom's fleeting words of encouragement never filled the loneliness in what should otherwise have been a relatively happy life. When Dad came home on

Broken Rose

leave, they did some fun things together, went to places and wandered the city, but Mason found those activities superficial. Then his dad would be off again on a cruise and he would retreat into his shell.

He knew things were missing in his life other kids his age appeared to take for granted, unable to clearly define what he wanted. The few times he haltingly tried to sound out his parents, particularly Mom as she represented a constant presence, she told him not to worry about it, and he'd soon have friends like everybody else. A normal phase he was going through, she assured him dismissively, and would go back to making dinner or whatever. He never developed close friendships, though, and worked to strengthen his shield against the world.

Mason started primary school at five, skipped prep and went straight into grade one. He devoured the curriculum and also bypassed grade three. Only ten, he entered University High School in Parkville, a short hop by tram from RMIT. Both his parents had little time for expensive private schools and claimed a good public school adequately prepared students for tertiary life.

His teachers knew him to be exceptionally bright, but were amazed when he completed Year 7 and 8 in his first year. He could easily have skipped another year, but the school stood firm, insisting he follow their rigid program. Fascinated with computers, he decided to make it his career. He persuaded Mom to get him the RMIT IT degree curriculum and books, taught himself COBOL and FORTRAN, and submitted programs to the computer center prepared initially on punched cards until screens and keyboards did away with that. With a Higher School Certificate pass of ninety-eight percent, he enrolled at RMIT University to study information technology. Released from relative high school discipline, for the first time in his life, he experienced genuine freedom.

Although he had a course advisor, nobody cared if he attended lectures, tutorials, did his assignments, passed or failed.

Some of his classmates embraced this unexpected release and forgot why they entered university, which invariably effected their studies. Still a teenager struggling to be a young adult, Mason also fell into that trap, which almost derailed his degree if not for a few figurative wake-up kicks in the butt from his dad.

At one Student Union gathering, he met three cheerful guys who turned into firm friends. Arthur Landry, the bookworm as the others affectionately called him, enrolled to study electrical engineering, while Liam Anderson, thin and gangly, a little awkward, specialized in electronics. Logan Bernard, chubby and always cheerful, pursued a degree in geology. Although they were all three years his senior, put together, the four of them were definitely a weird mob, Mason admitted.

Independence also meant a chance to devote some dedicated time pursuing girls—a fascinating new subject for Mason—and the campus provided a broad selection of local and international targets. He maintained a friendly relationship with two girls in his class and sometimes went out to lunch with them, but never asked any on a date. This attitude naturally generated some ribbing from his friends for being a cube, which he ignored.

Early in their second year, Arthur said that Mandy in his circuit design class was a ready lay and Mason should ask her out. They met a few times as a group over lunch and Mason admitted he liked the willowy brunette. His hormones sizzled at the prospect of having her alone with him. All the while, struggling to avert his straying eyes from her firm cleavage. A gangly, engaging, 176cm-tall, sixteen-year-old youngster, totally innocent with girls, and she three years older, he plucked up enough courage to ask her out. He remembered her mischievous smile as she said yes. That afternoon between lectures, she waylaid him, dragged him into an empty classroom, and Mason had his first encounter with sex. The startling episode left him excited, but also frightened at the prospect of someone barging in while they were at it.

Broken Rose

In the evening, he replayed the episode in vivid detail, relishing the tantalizing prospect of another memorable encounter. Not to be, though. They remained friendly and went out a few times, but without further intimate escapades. Arthur later told him Mandy went out with him only to find out what it would be like with the college nerd. Over time, not interested in a serious relationship, Mason lost track of her and often wondered what became of the enchanting brunette, not curious enough to ask Arthur.

He smiled indulgently at the pleasant memories.

The sun higher in the sky, his thoughts jolted when a lone magpie swooped in front of him. Wings lifted, it flared for a landing, and began to inspect the lawn for available tidbits. Coffee mug in hand, Mason took a sip, back in the real world. The ache in his soul inflicted on him last night still throbbed. He badly needed Gramps to make it all better. The irony of that wish clear to him, he chided himself for avoiding a repeat confrontation with his old man. Instead of dealing with the problem, he sought a soft way out from a ghost, of all things. An emotionally convenient solution perhaps, he admitted, but he could not confide in anyone else. Any of his three friends would be prepared to console him and offer sage advice, but right now, he felt reluctant to reveal deep personal wounds to them. Some things, he simply could not share. Instead, he talked to his spectral grandfather, knowing his trust would not be abused when he opened the dark corridors of his mind. To maintain his sanity, he sometimes needed to firmly lock stuff in his memory that prevented him from forgetting. Lots of things he wanted to forget, though. As with everybody, his life contained a deed or two best left buried, and why he put an 'open at own peril' lock on them.

Enveloped in warm sunshine, Mason realized he must open some of those creaky memory drawers, shake out the contents, and see what they revealed in the light of objective honesty untainted by emotional bias. His father made a point perhaps, when

he said Mason harbored a wrong slant on everything. Definitely not everything, he pulled himself up sternly, but perhaps on one or two things, he allowed. Despite the impulse to come to this country retreat and cut himself off from his parents to find solace, he acknowledged judiciously that he did not want to cut himself off from them completely. Apart from Grandma, they were all he had, and children were imprinted from day one to love their parents no matter what, which inflicted a lot of misery and conflicting feelings on some kids later in life.

He had a bunch of cousins who lived in Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Germany from both sides of his grandparents, but they were distant acquaintances at most, good for a few laughs and sharing a drink when he came to visit, not done in a while...since 2019 to be exact while on leave from his UAE job. Then the Covid thing struck and no one traveled anywhere much. Time to water his family tree with another visit? However, none of his relatives meant enough to him to draw him back there. One day, maybe...

That which is 'I' is a tangible, quantifiable self that exists, feels, and is aware of the infinite. The 'I', which encompasses everything, is the image of myself and eternity. I am the all.

Why in hell did those words suddenly come to him?

Whether his father wanted to acknowledge it or not, Mason by his very presence impacted everything and everyone around him, in the same way they impacted him. He deserved a measure of respect and approval for his life's accomplishments. He wanted it! He never roamed the streets as a bum. Not necessarily done in a way Dad would have approached things, but his father grew up in a different world with different values and expectations not necessarily compatible with those Mason grew up with. Was that acknowledgment too much to ask for from his dad? He chewed his lower lip and pondered a more profound question. Did he deserve it?

Skits! He did deserve it. Just one word...

Broken Rose

Did he secretly hate his father for not receiving any word of encouragement or approval? A potential can of crawling demons, but Mason decided he could not push it that far. He wasn't so emotionally unstable. Still...one word.

He imagined Gramps nod from across the table, puff out a cloud of aromatic smoke from his worn pipe, and smile in agreement.

'Ti banac,' he often said to emphasize a point, and habitually scratched the right side of his head. *'Kako boa, boa,'* he'd add philosophically, meaning 'what will be will be'.

A somewhat phlegmatic and fatalistic attitude, but Gramps survived many turbulent years and experienced things Mason hardly found credible. When still alive, the old man never gave a crap what others said or thought about him or about anything, removed from the need to seek approval or acceptance from others, totally confident in himself. Mason admired that outlook and sought to emulate it, but the raw rub, he still wanted acceptance and approval from his parents, especially Dad, and that sucks, he admitted with chagrin. Why couldn't the dick say once, 'Well done, son'? Perhaps he did and Mason locked away the memory as it disturbed the preferred mosaic how he regarded his domineering father.

He so much wanted Dad to be like Gramps. One of life's imponderables, he decided with a forlorn sigh, knowing it to be impossible, the two coming from totally different environments and social matrix.

Since he bared everything, it did not take much smarts to figure out what soured his relationship. Although lack of approval for things he did played a prominent part. When looked at objectively, mainly small things caused fractures that over time developed into a deep rift he had now. As a kid, Mason felt an emptiness he wanted filled with laughter, fun, games, and someone to share things with. He made casual friends at the Childhood Center, and they filled his days, but did little to fill time at home.

Other kids had brothers and sisters, and he wanted one too. In September 1993—he recalled everything like it happened yesterday—Mom announced he would soon have a little sister. Mason couldn't wait, his spirits buoyed. In March 1994, she miscarried and a blanket of gloom descended on the house. His parents became withdrawn and somber. He did not understand it and voiced an obvious solution.

“Why don't you have another baby, Mom?” he asked with innocent naivety, Dad off boating somewhere with the Navy.

She fought back tears and hugged him. “I can't, honey.”

“Why not?”

“When I had your sister, something happened inside me and I can't have any more children.”

Later, when he came to comprehend these things, Dad told him, after the miscarriage, Mom had a hysterectomy. Mason disliked that strongly and felt cheated.

With the prospect of having another son or daughter snatched from them, his parents came to treat their house as somewhere only to stay and sleep, with Mason an unwanted nuisance. At least that is how it appeared to him. Sometimes, alone in his room, he could hear them arguing, and he pretended it never happened. At times, they sat in the lounge, stiff, silent figures, the TV providing the only movement and sound. His mom and dad had a barrier between them he could not breach, and it kept him from them. Faced with smothering emptiness, he often went to his room to watch a program or read a book, not knowing how to reach them or stifle the pain that gnawed at his chest their silence created.

Sometimes, he would retreat into his own special world and paint.

Early on at the Childhood Center, with other kids in the class, he tried his hand at painting simple settings, but quickly became dissatisfied and frustrated with the amateur results of his unskilled hands. So many vivid images crowded his mind he wanted

Broken Rose

to express, but could not make the brushes translate them to paper. One day, his elderly art teacher gave him a book on drawing techniques, composition, how to use watercolors and oils, brushes and different painting knives. Under her patient tutelage, Mason's hands eventually became extensions of his mind and the images were at last mirrored on paper and canvas. Childhood renditions that lacked sophistication, but that did not matter. He had another avenue of expression.

Many gaps remained to completely understand his parents, and they refused to open up to him, which left him to form his own conclusions, perhaps erroneous ones. Critical of almost everything Mason did, a time came when he no longer sought outward approval, although deep down, he secretly still wanted it. He needed his parents to pay for his education, but promised himself he would leave as soon as he could and rid himself off their influence.

A year later, Dad resigned his commission as a lieutenant commander and took a job with Thompson Engineering at Laverton as a senior designer. He said the company made specialty stainless steel containers for breweries, milk tankers, chemical processors, and the like. Mason recalled noise, clanging machinery, sparks, and confusion when he visited. His dad could have picked an executive job in the city, but for some reason, Nikola preferred to be a hands-on engineer. Mason did not care why his dad took the job, excited at the prospect of a full-time father at home, anticipating days of fun and games. Instead, the Adamov house remained a place of silence and dark moodiness, somewhere he came when not at the Childhood Center.

Mason felt betrayed by his parents. Both appeared to devote all their time and energy to work, and the outings they enjoyed before increasingly far apart. He liked weekend visits to his grandparents' house in Footscray, and later to their retreat at Mt. Macedon when they relocated in 1998, he only seven at the time. They gave him love and acceptance Mom and Dad failed to do.

Isolated at home, Mason learned to rely on no one. It took a number of years and a degree of maturity for him to appreciate the psychological toll his lonely home environment exacted from him and how it shaped his personality. Coupled with a sharp IQ, his teen years fueled a burning determination to leave and have a place of his own and become completely independent as soon as he started work. If his parents wanted to stew in mutual misery, they were welcome to it. He would write more satisfying pages for his life. That is exactly what he did eighteen months after he graduated. As a junior computer programmer, the ANZ bank gave him a low-interest loan and he bought a bedsitter apartment in St. Kilda not far from the beach. The day he moved in turned into pure exultation and a sense of unbounded liberty.

In many ways, he wanted to be like his father: tall, a Navy officer, athletic, a somebody. When Nikola came home on leave, Mason could not get enough of him, constantly underfoot, following him around like a puppy, looking for crumbs of affection. His dad appeared not to mind, and often shared stories about life aboard a frigate, adventures in the Arabian Gulf fighting off Iranian gunboats who sought to disrupt the flow of endless tankers exiting through the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint. This set Mason's imagination on fire, picturing himself on the bridge of a destroyer, his gaze lost somewhere on the ocean waters.

As a youngster, he often perused Dad's books stacked in the lounge's ceiling-high bookshelf, and worked through them, surprised at his father's ranging interests. For some reason, he never pictured Nikola as a bookworm. As a teen, he noted his dad rarely seemed to buy a new book, and Mason often wondered why. For him, the bookshelf opened whole new worlds, and he learned about politics, various religions, history, engineering, and sciences. He devoured texts on astronomy and enjoyed fiction on English/French naval warfare, modern warfare, techno-thrillers, science fiction, sprinkled with unusual fantasies. He adored Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave* and *The Hollow Hills*, amazed that Dad

Broken Rose

read such stuff. An avid reader himself, Mason often bugged Mom for money to buy books for his own growing collection. She'd shake her head and give him a handful of dollars.

Nobody's dummy, his dad entered the Australian Defense Force Academy in Canberra at eighteen, much to Milan's disapproval, considering a naval career a waste of his son's talents, and graduated with an honors degree in marine engineering. In one mellow mood, his dad said he met Brianna in 1987 at a Melbourne café, she at her lunch hour. His pretty Navy uniform helped capture her heart, he added with a nostalgic grin. They married in June 1988, her parents not enamored with their daughter spending many lonely months alone while Nikola went off cruising. A budding career as a lecturer at RMIT helped offset some of the loneliness, but Mason recalled times when his mom looked sad and despondent, and wondered why. Understanding came later. Soon after the wedding, Nikola received a subsidized loan from the Navy and the couple bought a comfortable house in South Yarra, some half-hour by tram from downtown.

As far back as he could remember, Mason's image of his father comprised of kaleidoscopic fragments. He recalled a stern figure in uniform, some outings, talks when Dad happened to be in the mood, and infrequent companionship. He loved it when Nikola came home, but they were always brief stays.

He never heard Dad argue with his parents. At least not when he was around. During one visit in 1988, Nikola announced that he submitted papers to change his name from Adamovič to Adamov. When he married Brianna, both would bear the new name. It triggered a heated row with Milan and left Mason confused. Gramps accused Nikola of forsaking his heritage, whereas Dad said he only wanted to blend into Australian society. Grandma shrugged it off, which caused Gramps to be sore at her for a time. Nonetheless, the new name stuck. Mason never cared one way or another, but admitted that Adamov came out easier.

His dad told the truth when he said Mason never paid any rent

when he started work. To them and most parents, it seemed the expected thing from their children, the practice not questioned by anybody. Like taxes, one simply paid up. Questioned perhaps, but not acted on. Payback time for everything they did to raise them? It seemed the unspoken reason. Right or wrong, he rejected what he considered an outmoded philosophy and refused to pay rent. Mom tiptoed around the subject a couple of times and Dad frowned at his son's intransigence, but Mason remained unmoved, perhaps out of spite.

Subconscious revenge for what they did to him? He readily acknowledged the possibility. He may be intellectually superior to most people, but raw intellect did not protect him from reacting passionately or impulsively. Hindsight provided a very stark mirror on past reality, he reflected wryly. As he sifted through his yesterdays, Mason felt a twinge of guilt for some things he did. Because of that and reasons never fully understood or wanted to acknowledge, he sought to maintain an amicable relationship with his parents, even if a façade. A rocky road as it turned out with a deep pothole at its end.

He took a sip of coffee and grinned in acknowledgment Dad's forceful prompting to study. Without that pushing, he would probably have flunked high school and ended up as a factory worker somewhere, blaming his parents and the world for his problems. He had to give the bastard his due. Nikola instilled discipline into his life that despite the stumble in his first year, served him well at RMIT and resulting career, but he resented the way Dad went about it. Instead of dishing out constant criticism with harsh, dogmatic edicts, which generated instinctive resistance, Mason figured a softer approach might have achieved the same result. Would it have, though? Would smiles and gentle coaching move Mason from his smug complacency and sense of infallibility? Perhaps his dad knew him better than he thought. In the end, he submitted to the pressure, studied, and passed, not from any personal desire to succeed, but prove his old man

Broken Rose

wrong and show him he wasn't a failure.

Mug cold between his hands, Mason gazed at the rolling fields lost in blue haze as they merged with the horizon, and came to an unpalatable conclusion he'd shied away from admitting for a long time. All his life, he clearly lived under a blanket of pride and conceit in his abilities that blinded him to many things about his parents. Last night, he stormed out because he reached a cusp his father triggered over the damned Forester. The car meant nothing, but it did serve to bring his load of emotional baggage to the fore. Overreaction on his part? With all his achievements, did he consider himself so psychologically insecure that he still sought his dad's approval? It certainly looked like it.

He respected his parents and appreciated what they did for him, but without love. Why should he love them, when parents did some of the worst things to kids that almost irreversibly affected the child's psychology and outlook on life? Yet, society drummed into children the command to adore their parents, no matter what. This set up internal conflicts that often resulted in trauma for the child, with disastrous consequences for everybody concerned. In his case, apart from an occasional warming of the bottom for a minor misdeed, they never physically abused him. He considered what they did to be far worse. They punished him verbally without understanding the devastating effect of their words. His inability to forget made him replay incidents in his mind and he constantly stewed over the unfairness of it all.

You're an adult now, Mason. Look at your problem as an adult and stop raking over the past.

Know thyself, someone said, he reflected.

He pictured Gramps sitting on the other side of the table, puffing on his pipe.

"What now?"

'Apologize, moj mali stroj,' came the unbidden thought. 'What do you know about your parents anyway? You ought to know by now what life is about. So you had one of those 'sucks' moments. There'll be others. Don't

let one event color everything you do next that may deprive you of the good times.'

"What's the use, Gramps? I can't hope to change any of them."

Perhaps, but you can change yourself, which in turn may be the catalyst that changes them. So far, it's all been about you. Did you consider their side?'

Mason bit his lip, admitting that Gramps could have said those words when alive, but they were not his words now. They came from Mason's psyche. He pondered the conflicting emotions they generated and wondered if they could be right. He did know a lot about his parents! After all, he lived for years with them. Pride and selective memories may have clouded his judgment, but why should he be the one to say, 'Sorry'? When he walked out last night, his subconscious told him he acted from wounded pride. He came here for answers and apparently got it. Why couldn't he accept it?

Skits!

He pursed his mouth and sighed deeply, accepting with great reluctance what he had to do, and pride be damned. The decision also brought with it a sense of relief and possible closure. He needs a man-to-man with Dad and come to a workable arrangement acceptable to both that promoted a live-and-let-live relationship or a state of permanent war. Grandma now in a nursing home with Lord knows how much time left to her, and Gramps gone, Mason did not want to alienate his parents totally, which would really leave him alone.

You wanted to be alone, didn't you?

Perhaps, but living alone did not turn out exactly fun as anticipated, he mused with a sardonic grin. He would swallow his pride and try to make things right. Better, if nothing else.

About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written twenty-one novels, which include eight SF books in the Shadow Gods Saga. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cell-phone systems. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends time as an editor and book reviewer. Stefan lives in Melbourne, Australia.

To learn more about Stefan, visit his:

Website: www.stefanvucak.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/StefanVucakAuthor



More Books by Stefan Vučak

<https://www.stefanvucak.com/Books/>

