Old Children

Tom Shapcott

for Ron and Pam Simpson

I

Dad’s new car was that Ford Customline wide as a bed and hissing with energy. We’ll drive carefully, we promised and took turns to burn up the bitumen right the way to Helidon. It never hissed after that. It sighed. Sometimes guilt takes fifty years before the blister breaks. The Ford was traded in after only four years. Dad’s silence was the rub.

II

Nothing is so unforgivable as your father’s innocence. Chairman of the City Council Finance Committee, Life Member of the RSL and of Legacy, Dad filled his life with ideals of Public Service and personal aspirations. Only a few times would Mum provide Dinners for Important Contacts. She had no conversation and her cooking skills were adequate. One night Dad offered the guests whisky before the meal (the bottle sat in its cupboard forever). Neat, Dr Patterson instructed. When he sipped he looked up. Then he saw me watching, sixteen years old and caught out. He turned to my father and said: You’re not having one yourself, Harold? My father’s innocence was undiluted.

III

At their marriage Dad’s father-in-law gave him a book: A Man’s Duty to Society. Grandpa’s background was dour Presbyterian. Dad must have read it because I remember most week nights we had dinner without him. Meetings and Committees. When he was head of the table he was Chairman. Mum, I guess, remained Chief Cook And Bottlewasher. But it was Mum who refereed our debates and arguments around that table. She egged us on or called a halt. Sometimes Dad seemed a visitor.

IV

Under the house Dad kept his workbench and the black tool-box that had been his father’s (a meticulous Pattern-maker). There was a clumsy swing for my young brother that could hang from a hook by the stairs. But Dad’s time of glory down there was when the grandchildren came those many years later. Thick wooden toys in primary colours and no one to criticise. Children can never forgive their fathers neither can they be forgiven. Time only incubates the virus.