

## **Exorcism in the driveway**

**Paul Mitchell**

If you accept the idea that conduct on sporting fields is a mirror for society, then Australia has never been a more peaceful place. Through a combination of video surveillance and harsher tribunal sentences in the past ten years, on-field violence in both the Australian Football League (AFL) and the National Rugby League (NRL) has reduced substantially. In addition, order-off rules in minor leagues have meant that club footballers have sheathed their fists in favour of letting their skills do the damage to the opposition.

But it appears Australians, in a move converse to the Roman trend, have created sanitised colosseums and made their streets and homes gladiatorial. In the same period that the AFL and NRL have become almost biff-free zones, reported violent assaults in Australia have increased 60 per cent, from approximately 9,000 in 1995 to about 15,000 in 2005 – a year in which 57 per cent of assaults were inflicted on men, most in the fifteen- to 44-year-old age bracket. It seems that while our football fields are safer, our streets, clubs and even our homes have become places where men need to keep their guard up.

My 35-year-old brother clambers down his porch steps and starts throwing punches at me. I grab his beefy arms and he slams me hard against his ute. His face is red and drunken, his eyes white, his mouth seething curses. Over his shoulder, I notice my parents at the bottom of the steps, shouting at us. My girlfriend Jo is moving towards me, a shocked expression on her face; further down the driveway, my kids – seven and ten – are in the backseat of my station wagon watching their father being attacked by his younger brother.

Until it happens in your own family, domestic violence is what goes on in housing commission flats or in poorer suburbs and towns. But my brother's house is a double-storey number with two living areas, four bedrooms and a widescreen TV. His violence is not born out of poverty: though I am the one feeling the effects of the assault, he is actually wrestling with the past.

Most heterosexual Australian men are never more physically intimate than when they are involved in a fist-fight. Boxers have talked about the shared intimacy of a bout, and I remember one saying that the hug at the end of a fight is as much about acknowledging their relationship as it is an act of good sportsmanship.

Soldiers, too, have spoken about this intimacy. They say that during hand-to-hand combat there occurs an emotional physicality not far removed from sexuality. That's perhaps not surprising: in acts of violence and sexuality we seek to transgress another's physical and emotional boundaries.

Think of the scene in the film *Saving Private Ryan*: a soldier lies on his enemy and grinds a knife into his chest, watching the life extinguish in his opponent's eyes. There's an expression of effort and satisfaction, one that could just as easily have resulted from plunging his manhood into his enemy. Likewise, upon the entry of the knife, his opponent exhibits a grimace of shock and pain that mirrors an orgasmic sexual response. In a film renowned for its realism, that scene is – along with those depicting the Normandy landing – the one most often mentioned as difficult to watch. It could be because we find the violence gratuitous. It might also be that we're reminded of our capacity to hurt or heal in our intimate relationships.

It is easy to write about one's abhorrence of physical violence. In fact, abhorrence seems the most obvious reaction. But there are those, unfortunately, who love it – or at least see violence as an understandable response in certain circumstances. And there are even those who find domestic violence to be a bit of a laugh. An acquaintance cackled when I told him I'd been attacked by my brother, and he kept laughing when I told him my kids had been watching.

With attitudes like that in our community, it seems abhorrence of violence remains an important topic. In my fiction and poetry, I've regularly dealt with the subject – particularly the violence perpetrated by my late maternal grandfather, Bill.

He looked like Errol Flynn and had similar charisma; a popular, tough and fiercely loyal man, Bill was a likable rogue with a roaring sense of humour. But he was also a violent alcoholic who abused his wife, kids and grandkids. While Bill's influence on the men in my family has been profound, my father – who admitted to being scared of him – thinks I should stop concerning myself with Bill and the 'violence' he committed against me when I was eight years old. I put the word in quotation marks here because I wasn't physically assaulted. Instead, Bill – who I knew was his

division's boxing champion in World War II – took me out of his fibro flat in Ocean Grove and told me to 'put my dukes up'. I'd said something 'smart' to mum.

If he'd done all that in the flat, with my parents, grandmother and brothers watching, the incident might not have stuck in my memory. But he took me outside, alone. I was about half his size and he loomed over me in a boxing stance. No one came out to defend me. I have never felt so alone.

I wrote a short story about that incident and it appeared in *Overland* and also in my recent collection, *Dodging the Bull* (Wakefield Press, 2007). Before the book landed on shelves, I sent a copy of the story to my father and told him we should have a chat about it. After he read it, he apologised to me for his part in the incident, but he added that he couldn't remember it. He also said it was time now to stop worrying about whether my grandfather's spirit continues to haunt my brothers and me.

But I don't believe spirits leave any place where they're comfortable unless they're exorcised.

I hold my brother's wrists but he still manages to dig his fingernails into my chest. He swears and accuses me of ruining the family. He yells that I'm not looking after my kids properly. He says – I presume because I have a new girlfriend – that I don't make my kids the number-one priority in my life.

Despite the outpouring in my direction, the source of my brother's anger is obvious to me: his love/hate relationship with our over-protective mother, and his sense of being robbed of a strong relationship with his father. And here I am, not for the first time, on the receiving end of his resentment.

My maternal grandmother was passive in the face of my grandfather's physical and emotional abuse. It is probably presumptuous to say that 'as a result' of her childhood experiences my own mother felt it necessary to elicit as much control as she could over the men in her life. But I don't think a child can watch her mother being abused without doing as much as possible to avoid it happening in her adult life.

My father was the son of a woman who stated outright that she didn't want him, and the son of a man submissive to a domineering wife. While my father tried to hold his own in a power struggle with my mum, he gave up in my teens. It may not have been his Waterloo, but after one of his fights with her, he decided to leave. The next morning he was discovered in the garage, sleeping in the wagon section of the Toyota.

My brother is a successful tradesman and a caring father but, like me in my younger years, he has struggled with depression and violent outbursts. My psychiatrist has told me that my depression and anger are the result of having my balls taken away by my mother – and my father allowing it to happen, while at the same time allowing her to snatch his. My brother has been offered no such revelation, and he constantly tries to please his mother while simultaneously resenting her dominant role in his life. He tries to get closer to his father, but he despises him for his weakness. My brother refers to himself, in the words of the rock band Rage Against the Machine, as the ‘son of a broken man’.

But for all his disenchantment with family, my brother still sees the arrangement as a strictly nuclear one. He appears to view with scepticism anyone outside that fundamental arrangement. We have another younger brother and he, like me, is divorced. It’s perhaps no coincidence that on the night my middle brother decided to launch his missiles, I’d had dinner with my younger brother.

From the street, our altercation might have looked like two hoons going at it in a suburban driveway. But underneath this ‘white trash’ scene were years of resentment and a string of failed relationships – failed attempts at love and at being a family.

While Australia’s major football competitions, under scrutiny of the video camera, conduct their competitions aggressively but fairly, another set of cameras on closed circuit television regularly captures footage of men out of control: fighting on streets and train platforms; inside and outside nightclubs and hotels; in road rage incidents. Despite the apparent ‘good example’ set by sports stars, men are – in increasing numbers – solving their problems and disputes with violence.

Assaults make the news when they involve celebrities (Russell Crowe), sportsmen (Wayne Carey), nightclubs (recent fights in Melbourne’s King Street), race issues (Sudanese boy Ajang Gor in Melbourne last year) or death. Calls are then made in the national media to deal with the apparent causes: alcohol abuse, lax liquor laws, security guard training, racial unrest, pop culture violence, poor parenting, social disadvantage and anger management. Properly addressing all of these issues will certainly have an effect on our rising assault statistics, but there’s one issue it seems we’re unwilling to name as a likely cause of increased violent assaults: competition itself.

In the eleven years that John Howard and the Liberal Party reigned over Australia, we became more prosperous and, according to the former Government's spin on the figures, more employed. The neo-liberal agenda of allowing society to be ruled by competition and the market produced the promised economic results. That same period of governance, however, also resulted in the 60 per cent increase in violent assault.

If, in our workplaces, we believe the only way to get ahead is to crush the competition, what can we expect in our homes, on our streets, in our public places or on our roads? Why should we expect the businessman who is late for a meeting to accept kindly the man who cuts in front of him in traffic? Why should we be surprised that our male sports stars, who quell the violent part of their competitive instinct on the field, use their fists off it? And why should we be surprised when the tradesman, who is used to cut-throat business competition, acts out violently in a pub? Or on his family driveway?

Time after time, my brother slams me into his ute. He shouts out his hatred of me, the brother he perceives to be an educated, Melbourne-dwelling, golden-haired boy. Off to the right of him, my mother is crying. My father has her in his arms while he's shouting at me and my brother to stop being idiots, to stop what we're doing to our mother.

'I'm not doing anything,' I say to him.

Jo's up close now, trying to reason with my brother, trying to pacify him, but his arms are taut and ready to throw punches if I let go. His curses continue and I know they're not meant for me. He wants to shout them at our parents. At thirty-five, it seems he's still waiting for his father to discipline him, to establish him as a man.

This is the third time in my adult life I have been in this situation with my brother, and I have never before thought about throwing a punch. Now I am weighing it up carefully. Not because I'm angry, but because I think, in a strange way, it's what he wants me to do. I've developed some boxing skills at the gym. I question what it might mean to discipline him, to do the job my father should have done, minus the violence I'm entertaining.

If I'm going to punch him, I'll have to be quick. He's an experienced fighter and he knows that the difference between being unconscious or standing over your opponent comes in the flicker of an eye.

I keep my eyes open, and blank.

Research suggests that boys who wrestle regularly with their fathers learn better how to control their aggression. No doubt love and affection play a huge role in that learning, but as a father of an eight-year-old boy, I know that his pent-up energy and need for physical intimacy are outworked in our wrestles. I set the boundaries; I show him my strength and test his own. After a wrestle, relations are generally more harmonious between us.

My father didn't set boundaries by wrestling with my brothers and me. We did it ourselves. When Mum was at work after school, we'd engage in some 'couch cushion boxing', so named because we wore couch cushions as boxing gloves. I was the tallest so I knelt for my bouts, my younger brothers could fight on their feet. We set boundaries: no kicking, no punching after one of us had said he'd had enough, and no using an exposed fist by bending the cushion in your hand as you threw a punch. It might only make a limited kind of sense but, as a result of our boundaries, there weren't many disagreements. In effect, we weren't acting violently; violence is transgression of boundaries. We were, through controlled aggression, doing our best to develop, not to transgress, our limits – until Mum caught us at it and told us to stop.

Thankfully, fighting is banned and strictly punished at my son's public primary school. But so is wrestling between boys, even in fun. While there has been a shift in the past few years towards men being more involved with their children, men with kids aged five to fourteen (a peak time when it comes to sons' need for their Dad) spend less than ten hours per week with their children in tasks that include dropping them to and from school and other activities, such as showering, dressing and eating with them. My guess is that doesn't leave much time for a wrestle, not much time for a boy to learn how to control his aggression.

As a 16-year-old, I had the misfortune of playing senior football in a minor Geelong league. I was clobbered behind the play, and in all-in brawls. I saw teammates and opposition players receive injuries akin to those that might be received in car accidents. To my mind, the AFL and NRL have got it right in their crackdowns on violence. Their arenas have become theatres for controlled aggression. As a society, it's time Australia considered what it might mean to follow our football codes' lead and find more ways – especially for those who don't play sport – to ensure that male aggression is harnessed and not simply punished. Whereas footballers practise self-

control as a result of video scrutiny, we have to teach men – young and older – that they have a camera inside themselves that can induce the same thing.

My brother is no longer trying hard to free himself from my grip. This is the moment: I am relaxed and ready to express, in language I know he understands, that he's crossed a boundary; he needs to know that I'm not going to tolerate his behaviour.

But I decide that I will not punch my brother. I know it will exacerbate the situation if I do. Instead, I hold on to his arms as my father yells at him to leave me alone.

'Listen to your father,' I say, knowing that I mean I want him to listen to our father now, in the past and the future. I want him to accept my father's discipline, as late as it is.

I can feel your strength, brother. Can you feel mine?

I don't know if it's an act of strength, self-control or plain tiredness, but he lets me go. As I get into my car, I can see my mother bent over and crying with my father holding on to her. I'm shaking and sore. Jo breathes out deeply and asks whether I'm okay to drive. I tell her I am and I try to back down the driveway without slamming my foot on the accelerator. As I turn to look where I'm going, I see the frozen expressions on my kids' faces. I tell them it's okay, everything's going to be alright.

'Why is nanna crying?' my daughter asks.

'Because she was upset by the fighting,' I say.

My son asks why my brother was slamming me into the ute.

'Because he was angry,' I say, and leave it at that for now. I don't know it yet, but it's going to take another two days to debrief the kids. When I speak to them the next day, I tell them we won't be going to see their uncle any time soon. My son lets out a sigh.

'Thank God,' he says.

'Estranged.' I've always found the word eerie and somewhat impenetrable, likely due to the fact that 'strange' is trapped in it. Whenever I heard the term on the news as a kid – 'her estranged husband' – I didn't know it meant that two people were no longer in contact. I thought it meant that the husband was somehow weird or different, not entirely trustworthy. I suppose I wasn't far wrong: both parties to an estrangement are likely to feel the other is weird and unable to be trusted.

A few days after the altercation with my brother, after I had considered what it might mean to charge him with assault, his wife rang and left a message on my answering machine. She said she was sorry that things turned out the way they did. She said to give her a ring if I wanted to.

I rang her mobile and got her answering service. 'Thanks for the call,' I said, and I apologised for any way in which my behaviour had caused offence that weekend. I said that I forgave my brother, but that there were a number of other things I wanted to say to him. These were things, however, I would only communicate in professional mediation and she should pass on that message.

It's been five months and I haven't heard from my brother. It's as if I've knocked him out in the driveway. I hope to hear from him when he comes to. I also hope the ghost of my grandfather is sleeping peacefully beside him.

*Paul Mitchell is Melbourne-based writer. His latest books are a short fiction collection, *Dodging the Bull* (Wakefield Press 2007) and a poetry collection, *Awake Despite the Hour* (Five Islands Press 2007) He received a 2007 Australia Council Grant to work on his first novel.*

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