

**YOURSELF  
OR SOMEONE  
LIKE YOU**



A SELF-HELP MEMOIR AND JOURNEY  
TOWARDS TRAUMA WISDOM

**GRANT PARKIN**

# INTRODUCTION

My drive to write a book first took hold in the year 2000, the beginnings lost on a hard drive over the years. It was less than two years after the second major trauma experience of my life – the loss of my father in a car accident, when I was nineteen. My mum and brother sustained significant injuries in the event, while I walked away with superficial wounds.

The book I began writing then was very much biographical, as opposed to what you are reading now. A history of the Parkin family in the Eastern Cape or some such theme. Part of the reason it did not progress was my lack of belief that it would be of value to anyone. Perhaps a deep-seated insecurity and feeling of me, (and by proxy the book) being unworthy, however unjustified.

The book you are reading now describes four personal traumas and the choices I have made in dealing with them<sup>1</sup>. I was mauled by a dog at the age of three, experienced the car accident at age nineteen, emigrated in my late twenties and was betrayed by my

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<sup>1</sup> I have changed some names in recounting these stories. It is just easier that way. Where relevant, I have reproduced details from the journals I kept, while others are based on what I can remember of the period, in consultation (where practical) with friends who were with me at the time.

wife in my early thirties. Documenting these events has been scary and confronting. I have grown immensely since taking on the responsibility for detailing them. Choosing to revisit the darkest periods of my life and their impact on me, my family and my relationships. Transposing thoughts to words and then onto a computer screen. Reviewing journals and sifting through dusty memory boxes. The endless reviews of my own work before it even got to the formal editing. I refined these stories through this process.

They became my stories.

Stories I no longer fear to share. Stories that I am responsible for. Stories I own.

I believe I have now created a book worth reading.

This memoir also contains more than a sprinkling of humour. There is, after all, a real danger of taking this life too seriously. The first print will be published twenty-five years since the anniversary of Dad's passing. No doubt one of the reasons I chose to write it in the first place. Twenty-five years is a long time, and yet it can seem like yesterday. But muddied waters do settle. Clear water provides a far better reflection. This takes time.

Despite these events, I have chosen to consider myself very fortunate and am grateful for the opportunity to share what I have experienced. And it is a choice to feel this way. I am responsible for my state of mind.

Inevitably, writing this book required significant introspection and an attempt to answer the question of 'Who is Grant?'

And who am I? I am a son, a brother, a father, and a husband. I am a friend, a Chartered Accountant, a surfer and a skateboarder. I am a reformed Ironman triathlete. I was a competent oarsman. I was a violinist. Now I play the guitar. I am a migrant and I co-host a podcast in which we discuss the musical composition of albums. I am a survivor... and I have physical (and mental) scars

from multiple traumas. All these external validations... Above all else, I am a human being with an ambition to be a better person today than the one I was yesterday. It is my sincerest hope that through reading this memoir you will feel the same ambition. Now let's get cracking.

# CHAPTER ONE

## TRAUMA ONE - MAULED BY A DOG

I was mauled by a dog when I was three years old.

It was 31 May 1981 at Blanco Guest Farm in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. My parents (Phil and Patty) thought that our young family should take advantage of the public holiday long weekend and get out of the city. The guest farm three hours' drive from home seemed just the tonic. Despite intending to return home a day early due to poor weather, the sun came out that Sunday morning and we decided to stay. After lunch, Dad went off to play bowls while Mum, my little brother Richard and me stayed in our room playing until it was time for afternoon tea. All meals were served at the meal room only a short walk away. The three of us arrived an hour early, having misread the Sunday meal schedule, and decided to go watch Dad. We took a shortcut to the bowling green, walking around the meal room and past the kitchen. Richard was in the pram and I was walking next to Mum, holding a piece of thatch, when the Rhodesian Ridgeback peered out the kitchen door. Mum watched in horror as the dog rushed at me and started attacking, knocking me off my feet. Mum ran forward and tried to beat the dog off me but by then the animal had bitten my forehead, ripped my bottom lip in half and started on the left-hand side of my face. We discovered later that it had

previously attacked other children.

(I think) I remember parts of the experience:

The dog turning.

The mouth coming towards me.

Me falling backwards... into darkness.

Hysterical, Mum picked me up and carried me to find help, leaving Richard crying in his pram where the attack had just taken place. Looking back, we were fortunate the dog did not attack him too. One of the other guests saw us covered in blood and rushed to call my dad. There followed some quick decision-making. There was no time to pack belongings and Richard was left with friends while Mum and Dad raced me to Queenstown – the closest large town and over an hour's drive away.

I regained consciousness and was being cradled by Mum in the back seat of our car, blood on the roof and all over my clothes. Sore and in pain. Fear and shock on my dad's face as he turned around from the front passenger seat.

The doctor in Queenstown bandaged my head and gave me something to ease the pain. Dad drove the rest of the way home, still over two hours away, where our family doctor was waiting at the hospital. The legal speed limit was totally ignored as he rushed to get his injured son to safety. Unfortunately, the local plastic surgeon was also away for the long weekend so our doctor offered to stitch up the injuries. It broke Mum's heart when he took me in his arms and walked off to the operating theatre, me screaming desperately for her.

I remember the high roof of a white room. A man in a white coat walking past the doorway with a pen and paper, obviously a doctor, looking in at me, shaking his head and moving on. My eyes black and blue, arms tied to the cot to stop me pulling out my drip. Trapped, sore, alone and afraid. The horrible antiseptic smell of the hospital entering my lungs with every breath,

permeating my entire existence.

I needed a skin graft to help fix the wound in between my eyes and had more lacerations on my temple. On the rare occasion I got angry, that scar on my temple, in particular, would get red like Harry Potter's, although this comparison would only be made decades later. It took many stitches to put my face together again.

This was part of how my world view was formed.

Bad things can happen and can happen very quickly. Shortly after leaving the hospital, I snuck into the lounge room where my parents were entertaining friends. I climbed onto some bar stools and subsequently fell off, cracking open the stitches and requiring additional surgery. The last of the reconstruction operations was to remove scar tissue from my bottom lip when I was thirteen.

Immediately after those early operations, I was told not to smile. Smiling would split the stitches holding my bottom lip together. Smiling physically hurt. A child does not understand these concepts. I wanted to laugh and smile. The world was confusing. I cannot imagine how this experience impacted my mum's world view.

On another occasion, I walked out of sight of my parents while wandering around the garden. Our family dog (a golden retriever called Bumpy) gently put my arm in her mouth and led me back within sight. Bumpy's loving care brought back terrible memories and fear in me.

The scars ensured the standard playground name-calling at school: 'Scarface' being chief among them. Having had such an extreme experience so young put me at a disadvantage when it came to dealing with these periods. I was/remain a scar face. I was scared to engage in playground scuffles that might quickly have resolved these episodes of teasing. I knew what pain was. Real physical pain. And real emotional pain. It didn't matter that

my parents loved me dearly. These were the facts. Scarface.

At junior school at Selborne Primary in East London<sup>2</sup> (South Africa – yes, it does exist) I meandered through the grades, daydreaming the days away doing just enough to get through and never particularly achieving anything. I played cricket in the summer months and soccer in winter as rugby was too violent for me. People got injured playing rugby. I knew hurt. I did not want to hurt again. In a strange twist of fate, I would break my ankle playing soccer. As there was no such thing as soccer in high school at that time, at least not in the schools I was going to attend, Dad thought it wise that I got a year of rugby under the belt prior to commencing high school. In my last year in junior school, I would play rugby as my winter sport.

I had to make a choice of what position to play in this new sport, which required going on the guidance of the other boys who had played it for years. My body shape lent itself to two positions: ‘Inside Centre’ (in the backline) or ‘Hooker’ (in the forwards). As speed and a sidestep were attributes I had never possessed, Centre was out. That left Hooker. In the middle of the front row of the scrum. The scrum: where eight of my mob pushes against eight of your mob for brief ownership of a piece of leather. Hooker: the most dangerous position of the eight, as both your hands grip around the ‘Prop’ on either side of you. If the scrum collapses, which happens occasionally, you literally eat dirt. People have broken their necks in the scrum<sup>3</sup>. Bad things can happen. I didn’t want bad things to happen to me again.

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<sup>2</sup> East London is a city on the east coast of South Africa, about two-thirds of the way up between Cape Town and Durban.

<sup>3</sup> A local high school boy playing in the front row had broken his neck and died over this period too, no doubt adding to the anxiety of playing Hooker, indeed, in the front row, at all.





I was mauled by a dog at the age of three. It would be decades before I fully understood the impact this had on my world view, thanks to reading Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score*. Refer to Appendix One.

With neither option being palatable, I chose option C: ‘Loosehead Prop’, immediately to the left of the Hooker in the scrum and still in the front row. This allowed me to simply move out of the way if the scrum collapsed. I would play for the under thirteen C team, barefoot in those days. Playing up in Queenstown on frostbitten fields was an experience.

Junior school almost complete, I was going to attend Selborne College the following year. Then my parents went to a presentation for St Andrew’s College (based in Grahamstown<sup>4</sup> – 180 kilometres away) late in 1991. My dad<sup>5</sup> and great-grandad had attended St Andrew’s, a school so confident it refers to itself only as ‘College’. Due to the high cost of the school fees, it was initially planned that I would attend only the final three years (as opposed to the full five years) of high school at College. However, my parents were very impressed with the presentation and I was awarded a bursary, partially covering the costs. My career as an ‘Andreas’ (scholar at College) commenced in January 1992 in Graham House. At the tender age of thirteen, this blonde-haired blue-eyed boy was going to leave the family home. Dad was unemployed at the time.

I think thirteen was young to go to boarding school, yet others had done it for their whole school careers and knew no different. You do what you have to do, I suppose. I would continue meandering through, spending some time playing cricket, which really didn’t hold my attention, and then swimming the following year. Rugby, in the main for winter. Merely a participant. All the while, Dad said I should try rowing.

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<sup>4</sup> Grahamstown, now called Makhanda is a city of approximately 140,000 people. A number of well-respected educational institutions are based there, including Rhodes University and various private schools. It also used to host the South African National Arts Festival each July.

<sup>5</sup> Dad was in Graham House from 1964–1968.



January 1992 – My first day at College.  
No doubt one of Dad's proudest moments.

Begrudgingly, in January 1994 I attended my first Rowing Camp in Port Alfred<sup>6</sup>, sacrificing part of my school summer holiday to row up and down the Kowie River for seven to ten days before the Easter term started. I was late on the rowing scene, having attempted cricket and swimming in those first two years at College. And just to be clear, before the age of fourteen, I had never been good at anything. I also did not want to go to camp.

These guys were weird (and smelly). They were on another planet. I mean seriously, who gives up a week of summer holidays just to remain competitive with the mighty Johannesburg crews? And they wore these weird tights/flannel towelling shorts that left little to the imagination.

Anyway, I was going to try this rowing thing properly and if it was rubbish, my parents were at Kleinemonde<sup>7</sup>, a mere sixteen kilometres away. They could pick me up if this didn't work out. I could walk up to the payphone outside Guido's restaurant and call them, and they would come and get me.

Now, rowing attracted a relatively small group of people at the school. It could be the dedication and commitment required, or the horrific hand callouses and 'boat bite'<sup>8</sup>. It could be the pain of racing – you suffer whether you win or lose – or the lack of stylish kit, or the travel requirements, moving heavy boats, washing them down; the list is endless. There are a myriad of reasons why it isn't more popular. Maybe because it can be just plain tough.

Nevertheless, as luck would have it, I made a crew at that camp

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<sup>6</sup> Port Alfred is a small coastal town with a population of 26,000 and is almost equidistant to East London to the east and Port Elizabeth (PE) to the west, approximately 150 kilometres from each larger city.

<sup>7</sup> Kleinemonde is a small coastal holiday village on the East London side of Port Alfred. We had a family holiday home there since the early 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> A nasty occurrence on your calves, caused by your legs hitting the runners that the rowing seat slides on.

– the U15 AVIII. The fact that there were only eight rowers in our age group was a bonus! And so I rowed. Up and down the Kowie river in the Number Four seat of the boat, with my new mate Jay in at Number Three. We would row twice a day and it was AWESOME! We would wake up early and the water was always flat with fish jumping and only the occasional water skier coming past. Afternoon sessions were generally a bit choppier with the wind up and a few more people out on the water.

In between rowing sessions, we were free to do as we pleased, which sometimes meant sleeping, but most times meant boogie boarding at Port Alfred's famed West Beach. Nick, another new crew mate and I would egg each other into the dumping waves, often after the sun had set. It was highly amusing seeing Nick eating his own gums after tasting the sand bank one day, but that is another story.

About halfway through my first camp, the coach (Matt – an old Andrean<sup>9</sup>) who hardly ever said anything in any of the sessions (probably because he was horribly hung over every morning) asked us to stop rowing and for Jay and me to move from the 'Engine Room'/'Ejector Seat' positions of Three and Four to the Stroke and Seven positions. What?

I had joined an unbeaten crew that had not lost a race as an VIII (or the A IV) – including South African (SA) Champs since they started rowing a year earlier. Now, a few days into the camp, Jay and I were moved to the front of the boat to set the rhythm for the crew. Excitement was one word you could use. Fear was another.

Just because Matt was trialling us in these positions did not mean that we would stay there. But stay we did. Then we were told that Selborne College was coming to the Kowie that weekend

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<sup>9</sup> Someone who attended College.

for a hastily arranged pre-season regatta.

Selborne, where I went to primary school, was a virtual sworn enemy of College. I would be racing many of my old classmates, stroking the boat in an unbeaten crew. Jay and I were nervous. In fact, nervous was not the word. We were petrified.

We were rookies, and Selborne had run the crew close on a few occasions. How could we ensure that first loss didn't rest on our shoulders? We decided to do the most practical thing... we would jump the start.

Late on a January Saturday afternoon on a wind-swept Kowie River, after multiple attempts by the judges to line us up correctly, we jumped the start, got up by three-quarters of a length and held that gap all the way home.

It was my first medal. Dad gave it to me and Mum captured the moment in a photo that is still up in the lounge room. Selborne was livid. Jay and I didn't care.

I was good at something.

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That U15 crew would grow in confidence and remain unbeaten until the final regatta of the season – SA Champs. We got smashed that weekend, with both the U15 VIII and U15 A IV losing for the first time in two years. Hindsight provides 20/20 vision and, while very painful at the time and for months to come, I believe we lost for a number of reasons, including:

- A late crew change in both the VIII and the A IV
- My promotion to the A IV with less than 2 kilometres training
- Not having our normal coach at the event
- The crew not turning up mentally on the day

Overall, I had found something I was good at and looked forward

to rowing in the second VIII in my first year of the open division the following season, and then in the first VIII in my final year of school. It all looked like it was going to plan, rowing in the second VIII for the end-of-year regattas (Swartkops and Mayor's Plate) in late 1994. However, you know what they say about best-laid plans.



My first rowing medal. I remember being embarrassed by my mum taking that picture. I am so grateful now.