Writing Sample

Craig Cliff

Includes "My Yale and My Harvard."
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My Yale and My Harvard

... for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.
— HERMAN MELVILLE, MOBY DICK

It feels as if I was born in the passenger seat of my father’s cab — that the stationary world came later — but I had just started school when my mother left to sober up. My father couldn’t afford a babysitter, nor could he afford to give up the lucrative mid-afternoon to two AM shift he’d driven since dropping out of vet school. And so he’d pick me up from Petrie Terrace School and we would head down to Eagle Street to trawl along the north bank of the river for businessmen whose meetings had ended early. From the moment our first fare entered the cab we were at the whim of other people. Sometimes we’d head straight out into the suburbs, north to Mango Hill say, then collect a fare at the airport, head down to Macgregor, followed by a quick run from the QEII Hospital to Brookland retirement village — etching a ragged, many-pointed star across the map of Brisbane. Other times we were kept busy ferrying people from one office building to the next, trading one Christmas party or Melbourne Cup boozer for another, circling and circling the city centre, never making it further than Fortitude Valley before it was time to clock off.

Now that I’m a grown man with my own worries and responsibilities, I still like to be driven at night. It relaxes me. It doesn’t matter that outside it’s a different city and inside the demister roars — it’s the movement and the soft flash of streetlights that’s important. I don’t get around like I used to, but I’ve still had my share of female companions down here. Most I have convinced to drive me at night, but it seems to be a one time only deal. They do not like it when I drift off: to them it seems ungrateful. I used to tell my female companions how I’d spent my childhood, but not anymore. I have grown tired of their indignation. To them it was no way to treat a child, but these days it feels a great gift to have spent so much time with my father.

He was a talkative man with a thin build. I have met several others matching this description, but they are always hyperactive sorts, jiggling their knees, patting down their hair, blinking too often and too emphatically — but my father was not one of these people. He was so much his own person, his own type, that even I have trouble uniting in memory the voice of my father with his slow-moving afterthought of a body. He would strike up a conversation with every fare that entered the cab and the merest encouragement would prompt him to espouse his political, social and metaphysical views. When it was just him and me, he kept the silence at bay with recollections of his childhood, like the time he sliced his hand cutting his soccer team’s half-time oranges and was forced to move out of goal and into striker — Six goals I scored that day, would you believe? They never let me back in goal again! He may have filled the cab with conversation, but he never appeared to be hemmed in. He would change gears, steer, indicate and work the wipers with such minimal movement it
was as if he controlled the cab with his mind. He could go an entire shift without food or drink. I cannot say if my own meagre appetite is down to genetics or all those skipped meals in my formative years.

I see now how much I learnt in those last few hours of daylight when, if the talk at school the next day was any indication, my classmates were at soccer practice or watching Astroboy. In my father’s cab I learnt the importance weather plays in human behaviour: on the places we want to go and the moods we are in. I learnt that many people are mortally afraid of rain. That humidity makes men and women forgetful — you should have seen the swag they left behind. That a sudden drop in temperature is enough to send some women into labour.

I also learnt to read in my father’s cab. I remember sounding out the words of the Statement of Fares that was stuck to the glove box — I must have done so hundreds of times, but my father never told me to be quiet. Perhaps he was pleased to have someone else fill the silence for once. When I had a grasp of the basics, I’d bring picture books from home and read them aloud to my father and whoever sat in the back seat. The old ladies would often give me a fifty cent piece on exiting the cab. The old men, well, they would muss my hair or give a solemn cough while slipping their change back into the deep pockets of their baggy slacks.

My father would often brag about me, my reading, and invite the fare to open their briefcase and fetch me something to read. “He’ll read it, word perfect,” my father would say. “Not bad for a six-year-old.”

I learnt just as many things after the sun had set — things that most parents try to shield their children from, but for my father it was impossible. If he was to keep me safe, warm and fed, he had to keep me beside him there in the cab at night, there in the path of the drunks, druggies and prostitutes. But it never felt dangerous or seedy because I had entered this nocturnal world so young, and always with my father at my side. The proverbial frog that lets itself be boiled by degrees, that was me in my father’s cab. If I’d been thrust into a dimly lit room in the Palace Hotel and seen bare-assed Jim Leichardt humping rouged Missy Oliver, I’d have known something was off. But instead I met Jim (and later Missy) by degrees, slowly piecing together their personalities to the point where paying for sex, or making a living off of it, did little to disrupt the jigsaw I had constructed. When political correctness hit and people were no longer “disabled”, they “had a disability” — people weren’t “alcoholics”, they “suffered from alcoholism” — it struck me that I had been doing this reshuffle in my head for many years. Does this make me a better person? I doubt it. If those one-time-only girlfriends who agreed to drive me round are right, I’m not worth the wool I’m cloaked in. They say I’m empty or shut-off or borderline fucked-in-the-head. These are different women talking, but I don’t disagree with any claim, despite the possible contradictions. It wasn’t always the case, that’s for sure, but these days I can say with certainty that I love my father and I loved the childhood in which I heard the screams of the addicted in need of a fix and saw tattoos too soon regretted, two serious stab wounds and at least a dozen car crashes. A childhood in which I helped my father clean up every sort of bodily fluid and heard every swear word going around in those days. My father did his best to stop the backseat masturbators and racial slurrers in their tracks (“Hey, drongo, I’ve got a kid in here”), and would sermonise after every new sin had passed through our cab, but it was
rarely necessary. Drugs and alcohol, violence and verbal abuse — these things disturbed the otherwise tranquil passage of our evenings together.

And it was in my father’s cab that I saw my mother last.

I would have been about seven, still precocious in that malleable way of young children (“Do you want to go see the dinosaur at the museum?” “Yeah! What’s a dinosaur?”), but was already developing an attitude as I slowly came to realise my family situation was far removed from that of most of my classmates.

It was after dark, but too early to be respectably drunk. We were waiting in the rank by the Royal Albert Hotel. I wonder now if we had been driving and my mother had hailed us down, would my father have stopped? But he did not know it was her when she opened the passenger door and was about to climb on top of me and my father, out of habit, said, “In the back, thanks,” looking down at the newspaper he had begun to fold.

She closed the door without acknowledging my presence.

“It’s Mum,” I whispered to my father as she slid along the surface of the car till her hand found the handle of the rear door. He continued folding his newspaper.

“That was Mum,” I said louder and heard the latch release for the door. My side of the car lurched downward — she must have plunged head first into the back seat because when I turned around she was on her stomach, her legs kicking like a swimmer’s outside the open door. After a good deal of squirming she brought herself upright and managed to close the door. She swept a tentacle of hair from her forehead, stared straight past me to the windscreen and the early Brisbane night beyond and smiled.

“For fuck’s sake, Diane,” my father said.

The smile did not shift from her face as she slowly rotated her head toward my father, then to me in the passenger seat.

“Oh, hello,” she said.

“Mum,” I said.

“You have gotten big.”

“I guess,” I said. “Where can we take you?”

“Simon,” my father growled.

“To Dale’s place,” my mother said, ignoring my father.

“Where’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. The one with all the parties.”

“Over my dead body,” my father said, gripping his newspaper tightly as if it were a baseball bat.

“Dad—”

“No,” my mother said, shifting her weight to one side to pull down the hem of her black, crepey dress, “I don’t have to take this.” She sat for a moment, still, unblinking. My father staring into his rear vision mirror. Me flicking from one parent to the other.

“I don’t have to take this—,” my mother repeated, “this shit.” She reached for the door handle and exited the cab as ungracefully as she had entered.

I wound down my window to speak to her on the footpath, but she was stumbling away. She made it to the wall of the Royal Albert, leant against it with one hand, used the other to pull her knickers down around her splayed knees and peed on the pavement.
“Simon,” my father said, “wind up your window.” He started the car and we pulled out of the line of cabs without a fare.

It was around this time that the novelty of reading began to wear off. The old ladies had stopped opening their purses for me — I guess my talents were no longer novel, my attempts no longer cute. I was already top of my class in reading, could knock off a Paul Jennings short story in less than ten minutes and looked down my nose at the craze for pick-a-path novels. I felt that I had conquered reading and was ready for my next challenge. My father must have noticed the extra time I spent staring out the window as he offered to pay me a cent for every page I read. At first this seemed like a raw deal. I used to get fifty cents for what couldn’t have been much more than fifty words.

“How many times have you gotten fifty cents?” my father asked in the slow, leading way that made you feel you didn’t really need to take part in the conversation.

“Lots,” I said.
“Twenty times, perhaps?”
“Hundreds,” I said.
He chuckled. “Well, let’s say you have received fifty cents one hundred times. Do you know how much money that is?”

I folded my arms and looked out the window. We came to a stop at a set of traffic lights.

“Come on, don’t let the big numbers scare you.”
“I’m not scared,” I said to the people in the car beside us.
“Take a zero off each of the numbers and it’s just ten times five. You know that, don’t you?”

I said nothing.
“Fifty,” he said without the slightest hint of defeat in his voice. “That’s fifty dollars you’d have earnt over the last two years.”

“So?”
“So, how many pages would you need to read at one cent per page to get fifty dollars?”

“A million.”
“No, not a million, bud. Only five thousand.”
“Puh,” I said.

We pulled into a queue of cabs on George Street. “It might sound a lot, but if you read only a hundred pages a week, you’d earn fifty dollars in less than a year — twice as fast as when you relied on the kindness of strangers.” My father stopped and rubbed the back of his head. “I’m beginning to have second thoughts about this sweet deal I’m offering you, bud. How about half a cent a page?”

“Nah! We had a deal.”

“A deal? We never shook on it,” my old man said. It was his turn to stare out the window.

“One cent a page,” I said. “I’ll do one cent a page.”

I held out my hand. My father turned back from the window, looked down at my hand and smiled. “Pleasure doing business with you, hombre.”

The next day at school I ran my finger along the library shelves looking for the thickest book I could find. Near the end of the Ds I found a string of fat paperbacks: if I was in a cartoon my pupils would have turned to dollar signs. I tilted my head sideways to read the
That evening I showed my father my selection.

“Dumas?” he said, pronouncing the “s” just as I did for many years. “The Three Musketeers: Athos, Porthos and Aramis if I remember rightly.”


“So it is,” he said, “but you’ve got to read them all.”

I shrugged.

“How ’bout you tell me everything that’s happened in your book when you’re done reading each night? That way I’ll know you haven’t been skimming and I’ll get a refresher on the exploits of those canny musketeers.”

And so began a routine we kept through The Three Musketeers and its two sequels, Twenty Years After and The Vicomte de Bragelonne (though this last one was split into three books in my school library), and The Count of Monte Cristo: in all a solid year of reading. When my father picked me up from school I’d retrieve my book from the glove compartment and read. My father would start talking to me two or three times an evening, then apologise.

“Sorry, bud, didn’t mean to distract you.” Looking back, I can see how hard he tried to be silent, the gift he sought to give me. Every night when my eyes began to hurt I would close my book and my father would ask, “What’s the latest?” and I would tell him what D’Artagnan or Dantès had been up to before drifting off to sleep.

After my year of Dumas, I moved on to Moby Dick. It wasn’t as thick as the books I’d been reading, but unlike when I picked up The Three Musketeers, I had some idea what this novel was about: a white whale, a mad captain in pursuit. I’m not sure where this knowledge came from — perhaps a Looney Toons parody one Saturday morning? Whatever the source, as I opened the pages of Moby Dick for the first time it felt that I was catching up with every adult on Earth, not the least my father, who must surely have read this most famous of books.

But the book began nothing like I expected. A chapter, if that is really the name for it, on the origins of the word “whale”, followed by ten pages of quotations, most of which stretched my comprehension despite a year of reading Dumas translated into Victorian English. After that first night of reading, all I could tell my father was that a guy called Ishmael was looking for a job on a whaling ship.

“Have you met Captain Ahab, yet?” my father asked.

“No,” I said.

He must have sensed my disappointment. “Stick with it,” he said. “Him and old Moby will pop up soon enough.”

The next night I reported to my father that still neither Ahab nor Moby Dick had made an appearance.

“Well, what has happened?” he asked.

“Ishmael shared a bed with a cannibal called Queequeg, then walked around New Bedford.”

“That sounds promising,” my father said.

I didn’t see how. I began to wonder for the first time whether my father was misremembering the book.
On the third night my frustration could not be bound. Ahab had been mentioned, briefly (wooden leg, whale vendetta), but the story was still docked in Nantucket. I had been drawn into the work of Alexandre Dumas — which seems more action packed in memory than upon rereading — by the promise of currency, but soon enough I had been sucked into the lives and intrigues of his characters, the duels, double crosses and secret identities. But with Melville the promise of action seemed to recede with each page rather than approach. Instead of relating the tedium of the Pequod in port when I gave up reading for the night, I told my father in my saltiest sea-dog voice, “They’ve come upon Moby Dick.”

“Is that so?” my father said.

“Yup,” I said. “He’s white and he’s ten times bigger than the Pequod. He bit off Captain Ahab’s leg and now he wants the rest of him. But Ahab has a secret weapon this time around: Queequeg has a magic harpoon that can’t miss. And if that doesn’t work, Ishmael has a whole case of dynamite. But just as Moby was about to ram their ship, another whale came, a blue one, and— And that’s where I’m up to.”

“Sounds like you’re enjoying it,” my father said.

I leant my head against my seatbelt and shut my eyes, thinking about the story I had fabricated, the story I wished I was reading. Did my father really believe what I told him had happened in the book? If he had read Moby Dick, he would know I was lying. But he did not call me on it. Perhaps, I thought, as the taxi gently swerved and swayed and lulled me to sleep, my father hasn’t read the book.

Over the next few nights I persisted in reading Melville’s Moby Dick, but related my own version to my father, adding in details like the names of other ships (the Town-Ho, the Jeroboam) which I’d picked up that day to preserve what remnants of credibility my account might hold. My father continued to accept my version. I began to doubt whether he’d read any of Dumas’s novels as well. I felt superior to my father for the first time and it was the beginning of the end.

When I left high school I went to work in the kitchen of a hotel restaurant, peeling potatoes and scrubbing pots. I’ve worked in restaurants ever since. Whenever I saw my father, which was not that often, he’d mention my mother, which is something he never used to do. He’d say, “You sound just like your mother,” or “Be careful of the path your mother took.” I didn’t want to hear it. I was offered the position of sous chef in a new restaurant on Auckland’s waterfront and moved to New Zealand. This was just before the first America’s Cup defence. It was a wild time. The party never seemed to end. Then my father got sick. He’d driven his cab till the end, never once wavering from the mid-afternoon to two AM shift. I went back to Brisbane to visit him in the Mater Hospital, a place during our years together in the cab that we had ferried people to and from more times than I care to think. We never once spoke about the people we dropped off with their respirators and oxygen canisters, the bald kids and their milk-eyed parents, the strung out skeletons on their way for methadone. If these people ever left the Mater, we weren’t the ones to take them home. Our outbound fares always seemed to be the tearful next of kin, nurses smelling of rubber gloves and synthetic lemon scent, or a frazzled florist with a sprig of fern stuck in her hair. The sick never seemed to leave the Mater. And so it was with my old man. I knew it as soon as I saw him laid out on the white hospital bed, thinner and stiller than ever. When I heard him speak, his rapid, eager voice had been replaced by a slow, reedy one.
“Hi, bud,” he said. His eyes: blinking slow and wet like those of a dairy cow.

I was torn up inside, hating myself for not going back sooner, raging at the world that could take someone before their sixtieth birthday — basically fulfilling my role as the son in a story I’m sure the Mater has seen played out hundreds of times. What could I do? The doctors were as powerless as I was. I returned in the mornings to my father’s house in Chermside to shower, change my clothes and ready myself for another day and night beside my dying father (and walking the wards when I felt my mood descend to unhelpful levels). Other patients were wheeled in and out of the three-bed room, taking their flowers and whooping cough with them.

I filled the hours with talk. The sort of one-sided conversation my father had subjected me to in his cab all those years before, but this time it was me talking. There was plenty to fill him in on: the places I’d worked, a litany of jerk-off bosses and intra-kitchen romances; my snowboarding trips and the bones I’d broken — it all seemed so ludicrous in the heavy heat of February in Brisbane.

On the third day, however, all I had left to tell was the sorry state of my love life. I preferred to remain silent, but my father reached out for my hand.

“Take it easy, Pop,” I said, patting his upper arm and placing his hand back at his side, careful not to dislodge the drip.


I wiped a tear away and did my best to recall the flights of fancy I had inserted in Melville’s tale. The giant octopus Ishmael had wrestled. The giant bird that had carried the Pequod and its crew to an enchanted island riddled with buried treasure.

“I loved giant animals, didn’t I?” I said.

My father raised and lowered his fingers, telling me to continue.

I told him about the time Tashtego stole Queequeg’s tomahawk and the duel they held with harpoons to settle the dispute. I described in detail the strange customs of Kokovoko, Queequeg’s native land, where the Pequod stopped over during their pursuit of Moby Dick. And I told him about the great wreck of the Pequod when rounding Cape Tormentoto — how Ishmael, Queequeg and Ahab, the only survivors, rebuilt their ship from coconut palms, shoe leather and corned beef tins, and came upon Moby Dick for the last time.

A nurse came in carrying a bowl of water with two hands, a wash cloth slung over her shoulder.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” I said.

My father made an effort to sit up and took my hand, gripping it as tightly as he had managed since my return. “Pleasure doing business with you, hombre.”

The nurse smiled at me and eased my father back down.

I went outside to have a cigarette and when I returned he was dead.

What was there to do but climb into a cab, another bereft next of kin? I told the driver, a Somali named Ishaq, to take me to a bar, any bar. It was eleven in the morning and he told me this.

“I know what time it is,” I said. “Just drive.”

He placed the car into gear and we pulled onto Stanley Street, then right onto Vulture, heading toward Kangaroo Point. As we crossed the Story Bridge I looked out across the river, to the Eagle Street Pier and the corporate glass towers that kept it in shadow from
the early afternoon. We had rolled almost down the length of Adelaide Street before I asked Ishaq what he was doing.

“You told me to just drive. I am just driving,” he said. He held his palms up in a gesture of innocence, but there was an impish spark in his eyes.

We pulled over to the curb, opposite the city library.

“Okay, Ishaq,” I said.

“Okay?”

“Just drive.”

He edged the car back into traffic and we headed toward the river, following the bend around to Coronation Drive and down to Toowong, Taringa, Indooroopilly. We crossed the Walter Taylor Bridge to Chelmer, Corinda, Oxley, by which time I had eased myself down so that my cheek rested on the shoulder of the passenger seat. I looked out the window at the world moving past, keeping watch for a ghost in a black, crepey dress and thinking about the first time my father picked me up from school. When he said, “Hey there, bud. You okay to come to work with your old man?” and I said, “Yeah!” — not knowing what to expect, not caring what might come, trusting that all was well with the world.

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