



MAGDA SZUBANSKI RECKONING

'A brave and tender book.' Cate Blanchett

'A remarkable memoir.' Christos Tsiolkas

THE STONE OF MADNESS

If you had met my father you would never, not for an instant, have thought he was an assassin. Warmhearted, friendly, engaging, intelligent, genial, generous, humorous, honourable, affectionate, arrogant, blunt, loyal. He was a family man. He was handsome, although he did not have heroic stature. He was 5'4". He was stylish, fashion-conscious; a dandy even. He also looked incredibly young for his age. In his seventies he took to wearing his baseball cap backwards and, believe it or not, he carried it off.

He loved tennis, he loved ballet, he loved good conversation. Out there in the Melbourne suburbs—mowing the lawn in his terry-towelling hat and his Bombay Bloomers; in the lounge room doing the samba at cocktail parties; late at night playing his harmonica in the seclusion of the laundry—you would never have guessed that he was capable of killing in cold blood. But he was. Poor bastard.

He was born in 1924. He was a boy of fifteen when Hitler invaded his homeland and the war began, and as soon as he was able he joined the fighting. All through our growing up he would say, 'I was judge, jury, and executioner.' And I could never imagine—cannot imagine even now—what it feels like to have that responsibility, that guilt. To be a little god with a gun, and the power over life and death.

He spent the rest of his life trying to come to terms with what he had done. I grew up in the shadow of that reckoning.

In the Museo del Prado there is a painting by Hieronymous Bosch called *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, painted around 1494. In the fifteenth century itinerant 'surgeons' offered relief from the scourge of insanity by performing trepannation. They would cut a hole in the patient's skull and then remove what they called the '*stone of madness*'. Astonishingly, many people survived.

I swear sometimes I can feel that stone in my head. A palpable presence, an unwelcome thing that I want to squeeze out of my skull like a plum pip, using nothing but the sheer pressure of thought and concentration. If I just think hard enough...

That stone was my father's legacy to me, his keepsake. Beneath his genial surface, somewhere in the depths, I would sometimes catch a glimpse—of a white, smooth, bone-coloured stone. A stone made of calcified guilt and shame. I could feel it.

I can feel it still.

DEATH OF AN ASSASSIN

'All the old warriors are dying.' The wife of young Dr Łukasz says this with a melancholy resignation as we stand outside the church waiting for the priest to arrive.

It is October 2006 and we have come to bury my father, Zbigniew Szubanski. That was his name but no one called him that. Too much of a tongue twister. Everyone called him Peter, which doesn't mean the same thing, but Polish doesn't translate easily.

Denominationally speaking, he was a self-styled agnostic with a religious temperament. Aesthetically and constitutionally he was Catholic through and through. ('Ah Maggie, the ritual, the solemnity, the beauty. Roman Catholicism is the only one for me.') So here we are at a Catholic church in the middle of Melbourne suburbia, one of those 1970s post-Vatican II jobs. All exposed beams and big windows which let in dazzling sunlight and views of eucalypts and the occasional honk of a semi-trailer up on the highway.

The building and all the people in it are half a world—a lifetime—away from the charnel house of Europe. It is strange place for talk of warriors. But the wife of Dr Łukasz understands history. She knows that entire civilizations vanish, swept away like twigs in a tidal wave, taking all of their wisdom and achievement with them. She understands the protocols by which people are forgotten: erased from history. She knows the horrible truth that, while suffering is universal, the world cares more about some people's suffering than others'.

My father's body lies in a coffin draped in the red-and-white Polish flag. A pirated CD of Larry Adler playing 'Claire de Lune' is warbling through a tinny PA. My father was self-taught on the harmonica and would spend hour after hour practising in the laundry because we didn't have a shed. Polkas, mazurkas, old Polish war songs and Larry Adler covers.

Now the older generation arrives. With walking sticks and wheelchairs and titanium hips, these stately old Poles sail into the church like a sagging fleet of tall ships, and I feel a pang of nostalgia. They will never make them like that again: that style, that attention to detail, that level of craftsmanship.

Mrs Kobylanski makes her way over and kisses my mother Margaret three times. The Poles take kissing seriously. There are the welcome kisses—warm, hearty, a minimum of three. There are kisses that know hardship—strong, hard, the sharp press of the cheekbone through the flesh. And there are kisses that are like dances—ornate, flowery vestiges of chivalry. On formal occasions the men will kiss your hand and, on very formal occasions, will also click their heels. When I took my father to the Logies he kissed the ladies' hands and they were all enchanted, even the feminist bureaucrats from the ABC. I have never seen a Pole air-kiss.

My oldest Polish friend Izabella greets me warmly—with a kiss—but remains stoic. Her father always insisted his family must never cry, even at funerals. Emotion spooked him. 'During the war people would become hysterical, get the wrong idea, accuse people. Emotions got innocent people killed.' There was to be no crying at funerals, even his.

Inside the church there are maybe two hundred people. A surprising number, given my father was eighty-two, but he was a man who liked people and was

therefore well liked. Naturally chatty, he would make friends in the unlikeliest of places—with the captain of a river boat on the Murray, or the woman conducting the gallery tour.

In the front pew my mother is bearing up, but she looks diminished, as if some of her bones have been removed.

He was selfish, he was vain, he had innumerable character flaws. You could choose to dwell on all the reasons to love him less and thereby anaesthetize the pain of missing him. But for fifty-eight years he was there. He complained, he bitched, but he was always there, and now he is gone. Torn out of her.

About two years earlier I had driven out to visit my parents. My father was in the kitchen. As I came in the front door there was a loud *screech-clunk-bang* as Mum slammed down the footrest and leapt out of her Jason recliner. She headed me off in the hallway, herding me into the bedroom and out of earshot.

'Your father's been to the specialist,' she whispered.

'And?'

'You ask him.'

'Did you speak to him?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'Talk to your father.'

She scuttled off to the dining room with her cup of tea and the newspaper to do the Codeword. Black tea, lemon. All day every day, cup after cup.

Dad was at the sink.

'Mum said you've been to the specialist.'

'Ach Jesus.'

'So?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'What happened. Has it spread?'

A shrug. 'Well, put it this way, I probably won't be around for Christmas.'

'Two months!'

No answer.

'What?'

Another shrug. 'Nothing.'

'You can't say that! You can't just say *'nothing'!*'

I was a wriggling worm on a very old hook. All my life my father had been dying and all my life this was how we dealt with it.

'What do you want me to say?'

I could feel my anger starting to rise. 'I want you to tell me *exactly* what the oncologist said! Did he give a prognosis? Did he give a time line? WHAT?'

'Ach!'

Now he had me: I was a silly worrying woman. As though this was my doing, as though I had made all this up. He made it clear I was being ridiculous and hysterical. First he would frighten me, then he would tell me I was being ridiculous for being frightened. Cat and mouse.

He needed me to worry but he couldn't bear me to worry. He wanted me to fuss over him, but only if he could control how much I would feel. How much *he* would feel.

On this occasion I lost it. He had reduced me to being a thirteen-year-old again and so I fought back with the teenage girl's most powerful weapon: mocking cruelty.

'Why do you always do this?'

'Do what?'

'This! *Frightening* us with your perpetual *impending death!*'

He looked at me incredulously, like I was deranged—Lucille Ball to his Desi Arnaz. 'I'm not trying to frighten you! Why on earth would I frighten you? *I'm* not frightened.'

At which point Mum, her flinty Scottish accent honed to a deflating pinpoint, deadpanned from the dining room. 'Yeah, right. You're *just* as frightened as the rest of us.'

But it was another two years before I got the call. I was living in London by then: when he stood in the driveway of their Spanish mission style house farewelling me I was not to know it would be the last time. The oncologist had assured me that he had several months yet. But that time frame had

telescoped into days, if not hours, and now my mother was on the phone: terse, frightened, emphatic. 'Your father has had two falls.'

'Oh, Mum. I'll get on the next plane.'

So I did. I got on a plane and I sat in the sky for the next twenty-four hours not knowing if at the other end my father would still be alive.

We landed just after midnight. I turned on my mobile and rang my brother Chris. Dad was still alive but he couldn't talk or see. He had had two strokes.

Please, God, let him still be alive when I get there. Please, God.

I prayed to God out of habit and because... Well, who else?

'Ach,' Dad would say, with his curious hybrid Polish-Scottish accent, 'Maggie, so many times I should have died. I have had a charmed life. I came *that* close.'

The time when machinegun fire strafed the tram he was riding, the bullets miraculously flying either side of him. The time when he was an escaped POW riding boxcars through Germany, leaping from carriage to carriage in the pitch blackness of a tunnel. Then, years later, repeated bouts of cancer and heart attacks and a quadruple bypass. 'I escaped death so often I started to believe I was invincible.'

And now he is dead, in a coffin, dressed in the smallest suit we could find, which is still ludicrously big on his shrunken form. On his feet is a pair of shoes that Chris has lovingly prepared. My brother can be effervescent when the mood strikes, but silent as granite when it doesn't. 'I'll do them,' he said, and took the shoes into the laundry. When he returned with them they

sparkled. I burst into tears and started un-stacking the dishwasher so as not to embarrass him.

When I got to the hospital my father was lying on his side. He looked like ET. Small, bald, not quite human. He was so tiny he barely made a bump in the bedclothes. I went over and kissed Mum, Chris, my sister Barbara. Her kids Sarah and Simon. And then I went and kissed my father's cheek. It was warm as a freshly baked bun. I took his hand. It was like a furnace. 'That's the morphine,' the nurse explained. He had lovely hands, my dad. Neat, well-manicured. His mouth gaped.

'Does he know I'm here?'

'Yes. Hearing is the last thing to go,' the nurse explained.

But to me he felt like he had gone, and some part of me was relieved. I could say good-bye to him now, when it seemed he had already left. To look him in the eye and say good-bye when he was fully present? Too painful.

'I never grieved for my parents,' he told me often. Some loss is just too great.

For another twelve hours we kept a vigil. And it was in those hours as I watched my father chain-stoking to death that I realized it is as much a struggle to die as it is to live. The letting go of life is no peaceful business, and my father's body fought hard to stay on the earthly plane. His lungs continued to suck and pull at the air, to drag scraps of oxygen through his veins.

Chris's phone rang. It was his son Michael who was in Germany and could not get back in time. His voice was jerky with grief. He loved his Papa.

None of us had ever done this before. The nurses were kind and told us what would happen physically. But emotionally and spiritually we were way out to sea. Is it always like this? So clumsy and banal? So bizarre and so ordinary? Billions have been down this path before us but we bumbled through as though we were the first. At one point my sister started to sing. 'Amazing Grace'. My mother joined in and eventually so did I. My brother glowered.

At about 4 am I rang Izabella. She came straight over. Shortly after, Father Słowik arrived to administer the last rites in Polish—an insurance policy for my mother and me.

I had first suggested some months earlier the idea of visits from the Polish priest. My father scoffed. 'What the bloody hell for?'

'My god is a god of love. I don't need absolution.' I remembered his mantra. He used to run that phrase through his fingers like worry beads. He had taken the time to think about his soul and its welfare. Cut off from his family and the unit he had served in during the war, from anyone who had shared his extraordinary experience, he had been forced to make his own personal and very puritanical reconciliation with his God.

Four years before his death he had written to his dear friend Ryszard Bielanski, a fellow member of his unit: *You are the only person with whom I conduct polemics about subjects which could be disconcerting or worrying for other people. My correspondence with you is a certain type of confession because I write about subjects which I do not discuss or touch upon with anyone else.*

So, no priest, and no absolution.

But the things people really need to say are almost always never said. An act of interpretation is an act of love. And in any case, I couldn't bear the sight of him carrying that cross, the whole fucking horror of it, to his grave all on his own. He needed someone to help bear the load. Someone who would not misconstrue him or upset the delicate deal he had made with God. Someone who spoke his language. So I found a priest, a Polish Jesuit. We chatted. I knew immediately he was the right guy. And for some reason when I suggested it again my father didn't scoff. There wasn't the usual bravado and disdain. Slumped in his Jason Recliner, he shrugged. 'OK.'

The priest came over and chatted in the den with Dad for an hour or more. Immediately Mum got on the phone.

'The priest's been.'

'How'd it go?'

'You ask.' She put down the handset.

'Peter! Magda's on the phone!'

Silence.

'Peter!'

'Yes, yes! I'm coming.' And a muttered, 'For God's sake.'

'Use the phone in the den.'

'Yes, yes. Jesus. Hello?'

'Hi, Dad. So. How did you get on?'

'Well, at least he's not an idiot.'

'Will I ask him to come again?'

A pause. 'Yes. He's quite interesting, actually. And his Polish is excellent. Not like some of those bums.'

Polish. The tongue his mother spoke. For sixty-two years my father had not heard her voice. And now, in the hospital, as the Polish priest recited the last rites, was it this or what the priest was saying that forced a single tear to trickle from his eye? I don't know.

What was waiting on the other side for him? Was there a bright light? Were his parents there to greet him? Was there peace? Judgement? Forgiveness? Nothing?

Despite the modern setting it is an old-fashioned, solemn mass. Father Słowik is not one of those joke-cracking, MC-at-a-cabaret priests. He has a sense of gravitas. This is death—in all its glory and finality. My godless friends are deeply moved by his homily; but of course the Poles always do sadness well. Górecki's 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs' puts this sensibility to music. 'O *Mamo nie płacz nie.*' *Oh Mama, don't cry.* Words carved into the wall of a cell by a young girl about to be killed. The Poles know sorrow all right.

'God is the only true biographer,' the Polish priest says, 'because only He knows what is in our souls.' Isn't that what we all hope for? To be understood, finally? Do I know my father as well as God knows him? His friend Ryszard described him as trustworthy, 'a good man to steal a horse with.' He was solid, a good burgher, a reliable citizen. The priest knows the part of my father that is now, perhaps, preparing to face judgment. The part that needs forgiveness. He has chosen a reading from Luke's Gospel, the one about the Good Thief. Sin and redemption.

After the Eucharist Barbara rises and moves across to take her place beside the organist. My sister is a beautiful, delicate soul, and my father's death is a blow that strikes deep. But she is gutsy. I love my sister very much. Although we are ten years apart we have always been very close. Barb loves to sing and so I suggested she sing something for the funeral. And now, in front of a packed church, at the most emotional moment of her whole life, she is going to sing *Amazing Grace*. 'Och!' My mother blurts. 'She's too sensitive for this world!' In truth, my mother thinks we are all too sensitive for this world, as though we are a family of emotionally skinless burn victims. With trembling hands my sister lifts her sheet music and nods to the organist. She stands on the precipice, her eyes wild with terror, counting the beats. Then she opens her mouth and out comes a pure, slightly tremulous mezzo-soprano voice which dips and then soars across the notes like an injured bird taking flight. She makes it all the way through without faltering. We all sit there, our tissues reduced to wet snotty clumps in our hands. Then the church erupts into applause. My sister goes back to her seat, beaming. There are so many different kinds of courage.

Later at the crematorium we are all eating cakes and finger food. 'We will all miss Zbigniew.' Mrs Pieczak kisses my cheeks. 'Magda, *rozumiesz*. You *must* understand, only the *bravest of the brave* were asked to do what your father did.' She studies my face to see if I have understood. I thank her and take the plate of mini-quiches over to Mrs Dutkowski.

Rozumiesz. Understand. So many Polish conversations begin with this plea. Because for the most part the Polish experience has been so bizarrely awful that it beggars belief. In fact, many did not believe my father's stories from the

war. They could not conceive that this dapper little man was capable of cold-blooded killing. It just seemed too...ludicrous. This is the double burden that those who are traumatized must carry. First the trauma, and then the inability of language to describe it.

Or us to hear it.

'You must understand,' my father would say when I asked him yet another dumbass question. He wanted me to help him make sense of it, to find the right story for him. After the funeral Mum gave me a few typewritten A4 sheets. *'Your father started writing this but he couldn't go on.'* His jottings were incoherent. Snatches, fragments. Like a PTSD nightmare. He couldn't sit still long enough to weave a story. Get up. Move. Go and play tennis.

My father wanted to forget history. To live like it didn't exist. He had lived through an awful lot of it; he had no desire to go back. But all the old warriors are dying, and their stories die with them. I don't know if I have the right to tell them; but someone has to bear witness. Am I the right person for the job? Do I have the stomach to gouge beneath scabs and clean the wound? Is healing even possible?

We were two little tugboats in the raging river of history, my father and I—but pulling in opposite directions. He needed to forget. I need to remember. For him only the present moment would set him free. For me, the key lies buried in the past. The only way forward is back.

