

# Breath

Tim Winton

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We come sweeping up the tree-lined boulevard with siren and lights and when the GPS urges us to make the next left we take it so fast that all the gear slams and sways inside the vehicle. I don't say a thing. Down the dark suburban street I can see the house lit like a cruise ship.

Got it, she says before I can point it out.

Feel free to slow down.

Making you nervous, Bruce?

Something like that, I murmur.

But the fact is I feel brilliant. This is when I feel good, when the nerve-ends are singing, the gut tight with anticipation. It's been a long, slow shift and there's never been any love lost between Jodie and me. At handover I walked up on a conversation I wasn't supposed to hear. But that was hours ago. Now I'm alert and tingly with dread. Bring it on.

At the call address Jodie kills the siren and wheels around to reverse up the steep drive. She's amped, I guess, and a bit puffed up with a sense of her own competence. Not a bad kid, just green. She doesn't know it but I've got daughters her age.

When she hits the handbrake and calls in our arrival at the job I jump out and rip the side door back to grab the resus kit. Beneath the porch steps on the dewy grass is a middle-aged

bloke hugging himself in silence and I can see in a moment that although he's probably done his collarbone he's not our man. So I leave him to Jodie and go on up to announce myself in the open doorway.

In the livingroom two teenage girls hunch at opposite ends of a leather couch.

Upstairs? I ask.

One of them points without even lifting her head, and already I know that this job's become a pack and carry. Usually they see the uniform and light up with hope, but neither of them gives me as much as a glance.

The bedroom in question isn't hard to find. A little mat of vomit in the hall. Splinters of wood. I step over the broken-down door and see the mother at the bed where the boy is laid out, and as I quietly introduce myself I take it all in. The room smells of pot and urine and disinfectant and I can see in a moment that she's cut him down and dressed him and tidied everything up.

I slip in beside her and do the business but the kid's been gone a while. He looks about seventeen. There are ligature marks on his neck and older bruises around them. Even while I'm going through the motions she strokes the boy's dark, curly hair. A nice-looking kid. She's washed him. He smells of Pears soap and freshly laundered clothes. I ask her for her name and for her son's, and she tells me that she's June and her son's name is Aaron.

I'm sorry, June, I murmur, but he's passed away.

I know that.

You found him a while ago. Before you called.

She says nothing.

June, I'm not the police.

They're already on their way.

Can I open the wardrobe? I ask as Jodie steps into the doorway.

I'd prefer that you didn't, says June.

Okay. But you know that the police will.

Do they have to?

The mother looks at me properly for the first time. She's a handsome woman in her late forties with short, dark hair and arty pendant earrings, and I can imagine that an hour ago, when her lipstick and her life were still intact, she'd have been erect and confident, even a little haughty.

It's their job, June.

You seem to have made some kind of . . . assumption.

June, I say, glancing up at Jodie. Let's just say I've seen a few things in my time. Honestly, I couldn't begin to tell you.

Then you'll tell me how this happened, why he's done this to himself.

I've called for another car, says Jodie.

Yeah, good, I mutter. June, this is Jodie. She's my partner tonight.

Go ahead and tell me why.

Because your husband's broken his collarbone, says Jodie. He broke down the door here, right?

So what do I tell them? the mother asks, ignoring Jodie altogether.

That's really for you to decide, I say. But there's no shame in the truth. It's fairer on everybody.

The woman looks at me again. I squat in front of her beside the bed. She smooths the skirt down onto her knees.

I must be transparent, she murmurs.

I try to give her a kindly smile but my face feels stiff. Behind her I can see the usual posters on the wall: surfers, rockstars, women in provocative poses. The bookshelf above the desk has its sports trophies and souvenirs from Bali and the computer goes through a screensaver cycle of the twin towers endlessly falling.

She reaches for my hand and I give it to her. She feels no warmer than her dead son.

No one will understand.

No, I say. Probably not.

You're a father.

Yes, I am.

Car doors slam in the street below.

June, would you like a moment alone with Aaron before the police come in?

I've had my moment, she says, letting go my hand to pat her hair abstractedly.

Jodie? Will you just pop down and let the police know where we are?

Jodie folds her arms a moment but goes with a flick of her little blonde ponytail.

That girl doesn't like you.

No, not much.

So what do I do?

I can't advise you, June.

I've got other children to consider.

Yes.

And a husband.

He will have to go to hospital, I'm afraid.

Lucky him.

I get to my feet and collect my kit. She stands and brushes her skirt down and gazes back at the boy on the bed.

Is there anyone else you'd like me to call?

Jodie and two cops appear at the door.

Call? says June. You can call my son back. As you can see, he's not listening to his mother.

When we're almost back to the depot for knock-off Jodie breaks the silence.

So when were you planning to let me know what all that was about?

All what?

With that poor woman. For a moment there I thought you were flirting with her.

Well, you can add that to your list of complaints.

Look, I'm sorry.

Arrogant, aloof, sexist, bad communicator, gung-ho. Obviously I missed a few things, coming in late. But for the record, Jodie, I'm not a Vietnam vet. Believe it or not I'm not old enough.

I feel awful, alright?

So get a roster change. Be my guest. But don't do your bitching at handover in the middle of the bloody shed with your back to the door. It's unfriendly and it's unprofessional.

Look, I said I was sorry.

When I look across at her I see in the lights of a passing truck that she's almost in tears. She hangs onto the wheel as though it's all that's holding her together.

You okay?

She nods. I roll a window down. The city smells of wet lawns and exhaust fumes.

I didn't think it would hit me that hard.

What?

That was my first suicide, she murmurs.

Yeah, it's tough. But it wasn't suicide.

Jesus, Bruce, they had to bust down the door and cut him down themselves. The kid hanged himself.

Accidentally.

And how the hell do you know?

I'm a know-all. Remember?

She grimaces and I laugh.

God, you're a strange man.

So I gather.

You're not gonna tell me, are you? I can't believe you won't tell me.

I sit there a minute and think of those poor bastards sanitizing the scene before we showed up. The mother sitting there, trying to choose one shame over another. The other kids downstairs cold with shock. The father out on the grass like a statue.

Maybe another time, I murmur.

Well, she says. I rest my case.

We ride back to the shed in silence.

I hurtle on too long through the pounding submarine mist. End over end in my caul of bubbles until the turbulence is gone and I'm hanging limp in a faint green light while all the heat ebbs from my chest and the life begins to leach out of me. And then a white flash from above. Someone at the surface, swimming down. Someone to pull me up, drag me clear, blow air into me hot as blood. He spears down to me and pulls up short and I recognize my own face peering through the gloom, hesitating an arm's length away, as if uncertain of how to proceed. My own mouth opens. A chain of shining bubbles leaks forth but I do not understand.



So I wake with a grunt on the sofa in the empty flat where afternoon sun pours through the sliding door. Still in uniform. The place smells of sweat and butter chicken. I get up, crack the door and smell the briny southerly. I take a piss, put the kettle on and snatch the didj up off the seagrass matting of the floor. Out on the balcony my herbs are green and upright. I tamp down the beeswax around the pipe mouth and clear my throat. Then I blow until it burns. I blow at the brutalist condos that stand between me and the beach. I blow at the gulls eating pizza down in the carpark and the wind goes through me in cycles, hot and droning and defiant. Hot at the pale sky. Hot at the flat, bright world outside.

I grew up in a weatherboard house in a mill town and like everyone else there I learnt to swim in the river. The sea was miles away but during big autumn swells a salty vapour drifted up the valley at the height of the treetops, and at night I lay awake as distant waves pummelled the shore. The earth beneath us seemed to hum. I used to get out of bed and lie on the karri floorboards and feel the rumble in my skull. There was a soothing monotony in the sound. It sang in every joist of the house, in my very bones, and during winter storms it began to sound more like artillery than mere water. I thought of the Blitz and my mother's stories of all-night bombing raids, how she came up out of the ground with her parents to find entire streets gone. Some winter mornings I turned on the radio at breakfast, half expecting to hear the news that whole slabs of the district had been lost to the sea – fences, roads, forest and pasture – all chewed off like so much cake.

My father was afraid of the sea and my mother seemed indifferent to it and in this they were typical of the place. It was the way most locals were when I was a boy, and they were equally anxious or ambivalent about the forest around us. In Sawyer you kept to the mill, the town, the river. On Sundays blokes from the sawmill liked to row all the way down to the broad shallows of

the inlet to fish for whiting and flathead and my father went with them. I can't even remember who owned those long, heavy dories moored to stakes near the riverbank – they always seemed rather municipal – and whoever climbed in first became oarsman and skipper. The trip downstream could take an hour or more, especially if you stopped at snags and sloughs to try for bream. On rare mornings when the bar was open and the sea flat, a few boats ventured out to catch snapper, but the old boy would never leave the shelter of the estuary and no one, man or boy, could shame him into going further.

He began to take me along when I was seven. I liked the creak of the oars in their rowlocks, the disembodied shadows of pelicans rushing over the mottled flats. The big, wooden dories held three or four men each, and it was quiet out there with them on the water. The other men were always tired and hungover, but my old man was just naturally subdued. When any of them spoke up they had the barking tone of the industrial deaf. They had fags-and-sawdust coughs, those men. Their jungle hats stank of prawns and fishblood. They were bachelors and returned soldiers and bank-beaten farmers who seemed oddly solicitous of my father even if they did mock him for his teetotal ways. He was a greengrocer's boy from a village in Kent who never told me stories about his old life. But he was no mystery to his workmates. He was, simply put, a steady hand and as far as I could see this was all they required of him.

We fished with handlines and sinkers moulded from lead

roof-flashing, and while we filled hessian sacks and wiped slime and scales off on the scarred wooden thwarts, the surf bumped the high, white levee of the bar. Manes of spray hung above the rivermouth and flagged back in the breeze. When the bite was slow and I grew bored and restless, the old man consented to row me across to where I could get out and climb up onto the sandy wall and watch the great seas roll in.

I was a lone child and solitary by nature. Somewhere along the way I became aware that my parents were old people with codgers' interests. They pottered about with their vegetables and poultry. They smoked their own fish and mended and embroidered. Of an evening they listened to the radio, or the wireless, as they called it. Although they weren't quite grandparent age, they were definitely of a different order to the parents of other kids, and I felt that their singularity marked me out somehow. I felt protective of them, even if I was, in truth, a little embarrassed. Like them I didn't care much for football or cricket. I avoided teams of any kind and the prospect of organized sport was a misery. I did like to hike and climb but it was only in swimming that I really excelled and this must have been quite a surprise to my emigrant parents, neither of whom could swim to save themselves.

In summer townie kids gathered after school near the bridge at the riverbank to dive off the crude springboard. The river was brown with tannin and cold as hell but it was very slow-flowing

and safe to swim in. It was there that Loonie and I became friends.

Ivan Loon was almost twelve and a whole year older than me. He was the publican's son and although we'd been at school together half our lives we never had the remotest thing in common. That was, before we realized that we'd each independently perfected the art of causing riverside panic.

One December afternoon I coasted down to the river on my bike to have a jump off the plank but when I got there four girls and somebody's mother were slithering up and down the bank, yanking at their own ears and screaming that there was a boy in the water, that he was drowning right beneath them. Naturally they didn't know *which* boy because they were from out of town, but they knew he was a boy for he'd been there a minute ago and simply hadn't come up from a dive and were there sharks and couldn't I for God's sake stop asking questions and just get on with doing something.

Sun blazed down in rods through the big old gums. There were dragonflies in the air above us. I saw a towel near the diving plank and beside it a grubby pair of thongs, so I had no reason to doubt there was a crisis. Only the sluggish water seemed harmless and these females, who were making a frightful noise, looked so strangely out of place. I should have twigged. But I went into action on their behalf. As I bolted out to the sagging end of the springboard the wood was hot and familiar underfoot. I looked down at the wind-ruffled surface of the river and

tried to think. I decided that it would be best to wade in from the bank, to work my way out by feel, and just keep diving and groping in the hope of touching something human. There wasn't time to go looking for help. I was it. I felt myself rise to the moment – put-upon but taller all of a sudden – and before I could embark upon my mission, or even pull my shirt off, Ivan Loon burst from the water. He came up so close to shore with such a feral shriek the woman fell back on the mud as if shot.

I stood bouncing on the plank while she lay in the muck. Then she reared up on her elbows. Loonie started to laugh, which didn't really help her mood. I had never in my life seen a woman so angry. She charged into the water, lunging and swiping to no avail, while Loonie just ducked and feinted and giggled. He was a freckly sort of kid but he went so red with pleasure and exertion all his freckles disappeared. The poor woman never got close to him. Her frock ballooned about her. She made tanty noises like a toddler. Loonie sculled himself out of range, bobbed provocatively for a bit, then stroked off to the shadows of the far bank. Left alone with her once again, I realized it was more fun to pull this prank than it was to stand by while someone else did it. I began to feel more guilt than glee. Two Dr Scholl sandals floated upstream in the breeze and I watched until I could bear it no longer and dived dutifully after them. As I snared them and sidestroked back to the bank they clunked together like firewood. It was embarrassing to see this grown woman

standing there in her clinging dress with her dimpled knees and chubby legs all muddy.

There's tree roots down there, I told her. You just dive down and hold on. It's easy.

She never said a thing, just snatched her shoes and clambered back to the girls higher up the bank, and while I lay in the water trying to decide how to feel about her she smoothed herself back into some kind of authority and led the others up through the trees and out of sight. I felt sympathy and contempt all at once. Car doors slammed and there was the stammer of a starter motor.

Easy, is it? said a voice hot and close in my ear.

I jerked aside with a shout. Loonie bawled with laughter.

Brucie Pike, he said. You're all talk.

Am not.

Are so.

Am not.

Well, then, Pikelet, you better prove it.

So I showed him what I had. We dived all the rest of that day, kicking down time and again to the opaque depths of the Sawyer River to hold our breaths so long that our heads were full of stars, and when we finally climbed out, spent and queasy, the bank plunged and canted beneath us in the evening twilight. That was the first of many such days and we were friends and rivals from then on. It was the beginning of something. We

scared people, pushing each other harder and further until often as not we scared ourselves.

My parents didn't quite approve of Loonie. He was a mouthy urchin who roamed the town at will. He lived at the pub and my oldies were not pub-going folk. The fact that Mrs Loon was not Loonie's actual mother seemed to cause Mum some discomfort, but she tried not to let on. My parents were discreet and kindly people. Loonie seemed to provoke more anxiety in them than antipathy. They were so quiet and orderly that only a few years after they were both dead and buried few Sawyer locals could remember much about them, whereas Loonie was a creature of an entirely different sort. Now and again you'll still run into someone in Perth or Kuta with a story about Loonie's old antics, and although the tales are almost always apocryphal they still bear the essential elements of his wildness. Someone as solitary and feral as he was could naturally be expected to be a little simple and naïve but Loonie was neither. At twelve he was more worldly than either of my parents and in a queer way they were intimidated by him. He started out patronizing them. He was amused by their innocence, by their English clothes and the brogues they wore in the garden. He mimicked the old man's pottering walk and chafed his hands the way my mother did. Before I ever thought to bring him over to our place he began turning up of his own accord. He appeared at the front fence like a stray, just hanging about at the end of the long, rutted drive, a



restless figure seeming to await or even silently demand an invitation to cross the cow paddock. When he was in our yard or, later, at the lunch table, the old folks were nervous and diffident. He batted his big green eyes and joshed them gently in his loaded, mocking tone, smiling until his sun-split lower lip bled against his teeth.

After a considerable period, having made an effort to disguise his reluctance, the old boy finally consented to my bringing Loonie out in the boat with us. Loonie was so jovial that first time, so full of larks and noises of appreciation, that he gave us all a headache and even I thought it an act of mercy on the old man's part to have him back again. I think he saw how dearly Loonie loved it, how eager he was to help, how keen he was to please. Despite their primness I think my parents recognized some greater loneliness in my new friend, and they sensed that for all that derisory swagger he respected and even loved them in his way. He often crouched alongside my father at the smoker while the fish were racked and he was forever seizing a teatowel whenever he found himself in my mother's kitchen. That summer, when we fell in together without discussion, he was at our place most of the day and into the evening. He always overstayed, yet somehow knew to leave before someone finally dropped a hint.

On Sundays we fished the inlet with the mill men and when the holidays arrived we spent weekdays at the river making picnickers nervous. We salvaged junk from the tip we so could aug-

ment our bikes with weirdly extended forks and handlebars. We tilted our banana seats and sissy bars until we were virtually riding uphill on any gradient. Out on the highway Loonie played chicken with log trucks while I hid in the bracken at the edge of the forest, willing him to desist and urging him on all at once. We had escape tracks that wound back through the regrowth and spoil ground toward town, so that by the time a rattled truckie pulled over and backed up laboriously, we were long gone. It was a boyhood that now seems so far away I can understand why people doubt such days ever existed. If you tried to talk about it you'd be howled down as some kind of nostalgia freak, called a liar before you even got started. So I don't discuss it much. In this I suppose I am my father's son, a bad communicator, a closed book. I've bored people in bars and lost a marriage to silence. I don't want to join anybody's misery club, to be adopted as a fellow victim of whatever syndrome is doing the rounds this week. I'll talk if no one's listening. It's like blowing the didjeridu, cycling air through and through, doing little more than explaining yourself to your self while you're still sane enough to do it. I'm not a nostalgic man. I can go for weeks without thinking about my boyhood and Sawyer and Loonie, but in my line of work you're going to see things like tonight's asphyxiation and get a cold feeling you're not likely to explain to some kid in a crisp new uniform, someone who's already decided that you're a piece of work.