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# Son of Nobody

Yann Martel



CANONGATE

*Prologue*

Muse, have you forgotten him? Psoas was his name.  
Is he to stay in the gloom of Hades,  
nevermore to see the honey light of the world?  
What did he do to deserve this chill fate?  
Let me sing his song—then we'll see where he should stay,  
whether in that soaring cave called the mortal mouth,  
whence a flutter of the tongue will give him glory,  
or in that dank, dark place, silent and bone-chilling,  
where unhappy creatures move about like shadows.  
Psoas, I say, was his name and he was my friend.

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*"Muse, have you forgotten him?" (1):* I can see you at the top of the stairs, a shadow in unicorn pyjamas. You never did like going to sleep. It wasn't that you were afraid of the dark. It was that you thought sleep was a waste of time. Why be unconscious and unaware when you could be awake and having fun? The ritual was always the same.

"Go back to bed, Helen," I would tell you.

"No," you would reply, with fierce conviction.

"It's late. You should be sleeping."

"Don't want to."

"You're tired."

"Am not."

"Do not come down those stairs, young lady."

"Tell me a story."

"I'm working."

"You're always working."

"No I'm not."

"Where's Mommy?"

"She's working. She's having a late night."

"See. You're always working."

"That's not true."

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“Tell me a story.”

“Go back to bed.”

“I’m not going back to bed.”

Silence.

“Just one story, *please*,” you would plead.

“All right. Come sit here next to me.”

You would always win. Does that make me a bad father? But if I set one of those strict boundaries that parenting courses tell you a parent should always set, you would stomp upstairs in a fury and, a minute later, I would hear your far-off voice say, “I’m not sleeping,” and then, a minute later, “I’m not sleeping,” and then, a minute later, “I’m not sleeping,” on and on, like a yipping dog. And if that stopped and there was silence and I tiptoed upstairs, congratulating myself on my parenting excellence, likely as not you would be sitting in bed, eyes wide open, staring down the night, waiting for me. Having successfully lured me into your trap, you would glare at me like a little Gorgon and hiss, “I’m not sleeping”—and then *I* would get into a fury. And if I decided to wait you out, ignoring both your yipping and your silence, then you’d eventually come down again and we’d start all over.

So better just to tell you a story. You would tuck up against me on the sofa, which was always sweet, and sometimes I would pull out a book—I loved

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reading to you—but more often I would riff on a Greek myth—oh, the torments of Daphne as, fleeing Apollo, she turned first into a mole, then a rock, then an octopus, then an eagle, before settling on a laurel tree—or I would spin a tale out of nothing—do you remember the story of Fresh, the lost tooth who woke up one morning on the banks of the Limpopo River?—until I felt you go limp against me, falling into the arms of Morpheus, as they say, a story doing what a father couldn't.

But on this particular June night that starts our story, in the middle of the usual tense bedtime silence, as we were scowling like fighters about to lunge at each other, you on the stairs, me at my desk, there came from my computer a clear, resonant *ping*. I turned to the screen.

“Oh! Helen, come quick!”

You buffaloed down the stairs. You were there when I first read that email from Oxford. You shared in my joy—we whooped and we hollered, we did the chicken dance, you went to bed far too late—neither of us quite realizing the implication: that I would be leaving you. You only understood that I was really happy.

“*Psoas was his name*” (1): Never has so much been rescued by so little. *The Psoad*, all of it, would have been missed—lost—were it not for that unusual Ancient Greek name.

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*“Let me sing his song” (5):* I was the delighted, unexpected recipient of a scholarship that plucked me from my academic Pluto on the Canadian Prairies and sent me, comet-like, to the dazzling sun that is Oxford University.

At the news, over breakfast, your mother, Mommy, Gail, my wife, put down her coffee and phone and said, “You’re kidding me?”

“Nope,” I replied. “I got it. Full academic year, all expenses paid: transportation, room, board, tuition and ancillary fees, everything.”

“You said you had no chance of getting it.”

“It was a long shot. But extra funding came through, which explains the late notice.”

“Well, congratulations, that’s great. But now we really have to think about this. What about Helen? Who’s going to look after her?”

“I was hoping you could get a leave from work and we could all go to England.”

“They’re not going to give me a leave for a *year*.”

“This is an unbelievable opportunity for me—for us. I’d be working with Franklin Cubitt, one of the world’s foremost scholars of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri.”

“The what?”

“I’ll give you the quick of it. When—”

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“I sense a lecture coming.”

“Wait. It’s actually really interesting. When Alexander the Great died in Babylon in 323 BCE on his way back from his astonishing ten-year march from Macedonia to India, the empire he built was divvied up among his generals. Ptolemy, another Macedonian Greek, got the Egyptian slice of the pie, which he ruled skillfully. HELEN, COME DOWN. BREAKFAST IS READY! The Ptolemaic dynasty lasted three hundred years. It shone with particular brilliance in Alexandria. The Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was built by his son, Ptolemy II, and the Great Library of Alexandria was a Greek-language library. It’s because of Alexander the Great that the language and culture of the Greeks spread to the whole eastern Mediterranean world, hence Greek-speaking Egyptians and Greek-speaking Jews, people with their feet in two worlds. Hence Greek-written Gospels. Greek culture spread to every—”

“Okay, I hear you’re excited, but we have to leave soon.”

“Yes, I know. Just another minute—including to a town of some importance south of Cairo named Oxyrhynchus. There was something unusual about Oxyrhynchus. Unlike nearly every other Egyptian town, it didn’t lie directly on the Nile but rather along a branch, the Bahr Yussef. That means Oxyrhynchus was never flooded by the waters of the Nile, and it never rains in Oxyrhynchus,

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never, so when the Bahr Yussef dried up, water left town. Helen, maple syrup or brown sugar on your porridge?”

“Brown sugar. And yoghurt.”

“Brown sugar and yoghurt, please. Eat up. The people followed soon after and all life stopped in Oxyrhynchus, including the minute life of organic decay. Garbage in the municipal dump stayed exactly as it was, completely dry and undisturbed. And among the many things the Oxyrhynchites threw out for some seven hundred years, until about 500 CE, were scrolls of papyrus too covered in handwriting to be of any further use. A mountain of—”

“I thought they lived in Australia?”

“You’re thinking of the platypus, sweetie. I wonder what a Greek myth about a platypus would be like. We’ll have to think about that. Papyrus is a kind of paper made from Egyptian sedge. A mountain of Greek writing, double-sided, lay hidden under the sands of Oxyrhynchus until two British papyrologists, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, stumbled upon them in 1896. Drink your milk. It’s one of the greatest Egyptian archaeological discoveries, greater than the tomb of Tutankhamun, frankly. Over six busy winters—because the summer heat was unbearable—Grenfell and Hunt excavated. What they found was amazing. It was all there in the city’s garbage dump: bills, wills, petitions, official correspondence, court records, lots of personal letters, and literature, too,

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some of it unknown. Grenfell and Hunt came upon a beautiful poem by Sappho in the stuffing of a mummified crocodile. Even more amazing, they found sayings of Jesus, some unknown, from the Gospel of Thomas. What you get—wait.”

I raised my hand. Gail was making to interrupt me again. “I’m nearly done. What you get, finally, with these thousands of glimpses, is a complete picture of an ancient city and its citizens. Volume 1 of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* was published in 1898. Volume 87 came out in 2023. At least another thirty volumes are expected. My hope is to be a contributing author.”

“Okay, Professor Donne, I get it. But where’s *Mutilations of the Corpse in The Iliad*? Where’s Homer and your thesis in all this? What did Gordon say?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, you find a lot of Homer on Greek papyri. He was by far the most popular writer of the time. The original bestseller. As for Gordon the Gordian Knot, in a small department in a small university, every mule has to pull more than one cart. My weary thesis supervisor said what he always says, ‘Just find something to say.’ I don’t think he really cares what I do for the year. He—”

Gail’s phone pinged.

“That text can wait, no? I guess not. Come on, Helen, eat up or you’ll be late for school. Anyway, it’s not my Homeric scholarship they want me for so much

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as my knowledge of Ancient Greek. It's pretty good. And it's Oxford. It has the largest Faculty of Classics in the world."

"Sorry?"

"You want me to turn down a scholarship to Oxford?"

"You want me to quit my job?"

She was always the practical one, Gail was. But is life a practical affair? She didn't like her job, was always complaining about it. The hours, the pressure, the stress.

"And what if you did? You want to be doing something you love. And think of it: a year in England."

"Someone has to earn a living in this family, Harlow. Homer pays minimum wage."

In the balance of life, what is the weight of a dream, what is the weight of reality? Which tips the scale?

"Okay, we gotta go," continued Gail. "You're going shopping today, right? Vanilla extract, don't forget. And the cottage cheese with no added salt."

"Let's talk about it later, Gail. Think of what it will do for my career. You and Helen could come visit me for Christmas, at the very least. Go, go, go, girl, get your shoes on and out the door! Wait, bowl in the dishwasher. Helen, did

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you know that Alexander the Great slept with a copy of Homer's *Iliad* under his pillow?"

"Under his *pillow*?"

"Yeah."

"He must have had a sore neck every morning."

Out we hurried, all three of us, Gail to her job as an executive at a meat-packing company, I had tutoring that morning, and you had school.

But two fighters would circle back to scowl at each other.

"*where unhappy creatures move about like shadows*" (9): "This morning, you really couldn't listen for five minutes? And I didn't appreciate that line about Homer paying minimum wage, and you said it right in front of Helen. What does that say to her about the value of a life of the mind?"

"She's seven, Harlow."

"It's the tone, the *tone*. She's not deaf to that. And I've been looking after her ever since you went back to work, while studying and tutoring pretty much full time. That's a lot of work for little pay, you're right, but both the little girl *and* Homer are investments that will pay off."

"*Looking after her*? What, you're a single dad? She doesn't have a mother?"

"You work long hours."

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“I do, and then I come home and I also look after our daughter.”

“I missed that part, many evenings and weekends.”

“Of course you have. You’re very good at rewriting history.”

“No, I’m good at reading it. And you know what, getting back to the topic of Oxford, I think the time apart might do us good. A bit of breathing space. A chance to reset.”

Gail stared hard at me. “Really? The good dad thinks sailing off to Troy will solve our problems? How did that work out for the Greeks?”

“As I just said, it’s the tone, the *tone*.”

And so it started, as it always did, with the appearance of a single pinpoint of resentment that called forth another pinpoint, then another and another, tit for tat, until, out of nothing, in the evening quiet of a bedroom, shimmered the complete outline of a domestic dispute, a bright constellation of infinite acrimony. All that was needed now was to fill in the contours with colour, which we did wholeheartedly. We tensed our bodies, set our faces, fixed our eyes, hardened our tones. Our every accusation called forth another, valid or tenuous, shouted or hissed, no matter, so long as it hit the mark. We urged each other on, harder and deeper, loading our words with as much malice as they could carry, digging into each other’s weaknesses, mocking each other’s strengths, adding new twists, more fire, further venom, revived outrage, what