Breakfast with Paul

two novellas, two survivors

Bernard Marin

1

Maralinga

‘How are you?’ Paul said as the waiter brought his breakfast. ‘Excuse my ordering – I’m starving.’ We were at Darling Street Café, our regular place for breakfast on Saturday mornings.

Paul and I were close friends. In our youth we had been inseparable. He was the brother I never had, and perhaps I filled a similar role for him. We’d met at University High School and from that time on we shared secrets and confidences about everything, except his childhood in Warsaw prior to and during the war. He refused to talk about that.

Now, as retired surgeons in our eighties, we had been meeting at the same café for breakfast each Saturday for as long as I could remember. We talked about almost everything from the state of the economy and movies, to overseas travel. And today nothing had changed.

Paul was a good deal taller than me, with broad shoulders, and in contrast to my regular, rounded features, his face seemed to have been cut from stone. Cheekbones, nose, jaw and chin were made of hard, jutting lines, and his mouth was wide and thin-lipped. His eyes were dark and deep set, and his iron-grey hair was long, thick and wavy, whereas mine was straight and a pale grey. The hair on the back of his long hands was still dark, as were his lashes and brows. I had a

half inch scar on my right cheek, a souvenir of a university hockey game, but despite all Paul had gone through, he carried no visible scars.

'Well, I'm pissed off,' I said, sitting down opposite him.

'I can see that; your colour's up. What's going on?'

'Menzies has a lot to answer for!'

'Uh oh, what's set you off this time?' Paul asked.

'It was a Paul Kelly's song actually, about Maralinga…'

'And?'

'It reminded me of everything that happened and it started to play on my mind.'

'So, you googled it,' Paul said. 'Of course, you did. I know you too well.'

'And so I googled it. Our memories are not carved in stone; they often play tricks on us. Sometimes we forget, other times we distort reality.'

'Too true,' Paul said in a thin, dry voice.

I caught the waiter's eye and ordered my usual.

'Even so, the story of Maralinga is impossible to forget,' I said.

'Why do you say that? What did you discover?' Paul leaned back in his chair, his tall, thin frame only slightly stooped. He was humouring me.

'Menzies never should have allowed it.'

'What?' He quirked an eyebrow, his dark eyes twinkling.

'The British government testing nuclear weapons here,' I said. 'Maralinga and Emu Field in South Australia, the Monte Bello Islands off the West Australian coast… what was he thinking?'

Paul shrugged.

'The British carried out atomic tests in 1952 and 1956 at the Monte Bello Islands, and in 1953 at Emu Field north of Maralinga. It's only about 500 kilometres north of Adelaide.' I hesitated for a moment to recall the details of what I'd read.

‘There were twelve major tests: three at Monte Bello, two at Emu Field and seven at Maralinga, and hundreds of minor trials that spread plutonium over a large area. By the time the tests concluded in 1963, radioactive and toxic elements had destroyed much of the land of the Anangu and Pitjantjatjara people.’

Paul pushed back his chair a little and said, ‘But surely Menzies was acting in the interests of our national security?’

‘More likely he was keen to show allegiance to the mother country.’

Paul shook his head. ‘Don’t be so cynical. Churchill wanted the UK to develop their own nuclear weapons because he thought they would be seen as a second-class nation if they had to rely on the United States for nuclear weapons. What’s wrong with that?’

‘That may be so, but Menzies was an arch conservative, a monarchist, and was only too happy to assist the motherland.’

Paul tucked into his breakfast, apparently indifferent to what I was saying.

‘As far back as September 1950, in a phone call with Clement Attlee, Menzies agreed to nuclear testing without even referring the issue to cabinet. Then, after the UK discovered the conditions at Monte Bello and Emu Field were too remote to be workable, the Australian government granted them a huge chunk of South Australia to create an atomic weapons test site.’

‘Don’t forget the US had dropped the bomb on Hiroshima by then and allowing the British to test their weapons on our soil guaranteed us British protection, and probably US protection as well,’ Paul said, his voice rising. He turned towards the waiter to catch his eye before continuing. ‘Also, Australia did not have nuclear energy and we were looking for ways to power Australia.’

‘Did you know that Menzies offered the British more land

than they requested?' I said.

'How was Menzies to know what would happen? Maralinga was remote and sparsely populated, so what did it matter if he offered a little more or less?'

I could see Paul was becoming irritated.

'The fact is, Menzies displayed a reckless disregard for the risks associated with large quantities of radioactive material being dispersed across the country without adequate safeguards.' Why could Paul not see that Menzies had been derelict in his duties as our prime minister?

'Why are you so critical of Menzies?' he said flatly. 'He achieved lots of good things.'

I burst out laughing. 'Nonsense! All he did was kick the communist can for as much as it was worth.'

Paul frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Menzies was helped by good economic times. And, I might add, he benefited from the Labor Party's remarkable talent for shooting itself in the foot, especially where the DLP was concerned. Not to mention Arthur Calwell, who was an ineffectual leader – dour, dull and unelectable.' The waiter brought my coffee and I took a large sip.

Paul sighed. 'Irrespective of what you say, the fact is that under Menzies, Australia was safe, secure and prosperous.' He pulled at the collar of his shirt, and I could see the muscles in his neck tighten.

'Paul, not only did he give no thought to the potential consequences of allowing the British to test nuclear weapons on Australian soil, but he also committed Australian combat troops to fight in Vietnam when he didn't have to.'

'Have you forgotten the domino theory?' Paul said, his voice rising.

'What's to forget? It was a theory.' The waiter brought my

bagel and I took a bite, chewed, then continued. 'The US refused to allow the British to use their testing sites.'

'Yes, and for good reason!' Paul's face was flushed. 'Several British scientists had been double agents working for the Soviet Union. In 1950, Klaus Fuchs worked on the Manhattan Project, which created the first atomic bomb, and passed on secrets that helped the Soviets detonate an atom bomb years ahead of CIA projections; he confessed to being a spy!'

'That may well be, but it doesn't justify poisoning our land.'

There was a lengthy silence and I wondered if I should change the subject, but I pressed on.

'In April 1965, Menzies got up in parliament and said Australia had been asked by the South Vietnamese to send combat troops to fight in the Vietnam War. Wouldn't you think that he would have learnt from the Maralinga experience?'

'What on earth do you mean? What connection is there between Maralinga and the Vietnam War?!' Paul thumped a fist into his palm, as he often did when he was angry. 'So, what's wrong with what he said?'

'Only that it's not true!'

'Drivel!'

'There's still debate over whether Menzies really had a request from the South Vietnamese. They have always claimed that American aid was sufficient, and they didn't need any more outside help.'

Paul remained silent.

'Many people say there was no request and Menzies committed Australian combat troops purely to ingratiate himself with the US, just as he had ingratiated himself with Britain by allowing it to conduct nuclear tests on Australian soil.'

'They were our allies!' Paul rolled his eyes as if he were dealing with a simpleton.

'But all the assumptions underpinning our involvement in the Vietnam War turned out to be false. The North Vietnamese were not puppets of the Chinese, and the so-called domino theory that claimed once South Vietnam went communist, so would Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, was just that, a theory. It never happened. And the massive fire power unleashed by the US on the North Vietnamese failed miserably.' I stopped for a moment to sip my water and clear my throat. 'Did you know the Vietnam War cost Australia more than five hundred lives, including about two hundred conscripts, and more than two thousand of our troops were wounded. Thousands of ex-servicemen were traumatised by the conflict, and many took their own lives. Others became seriously ill, probably due to the toxic chemicals dumped on Vietnam by the Americans.'

Paul looked uneasy, and I didn't want to upset him any more than he already was, so I said, 'I know we're strayed from what we were talking about. But the decision to allow nuclear tests on Australian soil and the decision to send combat troops to Vietnam were both the work of Menzies. He poisoned our country and our countrymen with radioactive fallout, and sent hundreds of young Australians to their deaths in a conflict we need not have joined.'

'For God's sake, the British cleaned up the sites,' said Paul, his tone one of weary patience.

'Their efforts made the contamination problems worse,' I retorted. 'The Australian government also attempted to clean up the sites in 1967, 2000 and 2009, but it left behind plutonium and other radioactive contamination.'

'What about the royal commission?'

'Sure. In 1984 there was a royal commission into the British nuclear tests, and they found that radiological hazards still

remained at Maralinga.'

'Wasn't there a pretty pricey rehabilitation program?'

I shrugged. 'From memory around $100 million Australian, but what price can you put on a people's homeland?' I stared at him, but he didn't respond. 'The royal commission also found that attempts to ensure the safety of the Maralinga Tjarutja people were incompetent. The boundaries of the test fields were badly patrolled, and the British were dismissive of the safety of the Indigenous people because they regarded them as a dying race who shouldn't be allowed to influence the defence of Western civilisation.'

My sarcasm seemed lost on Paul.

'What a shockingly racist attitude. As Jews, we especially should sympathise with our Indigenous people!'

'What do you mean?'

'Our experience as Jews is, in many ways, similar to that of our Indigenous people.'

Paul gave me a quizzical look.

'The Nazis stole land from us, White Australia stole land from our Indigenous people; we, like our Indigenous people, were subjected to genocide and, like our Indigenous people, know what it is to be made victims.'

Paul gave me an uncertain look and said, 'Of course people should be judged for what they are, not for the colour of their skin or the group to which they belong. That goes without saying.'

'Thank you,' I said to the waiter as he put another coffee down for each of us. 'Did you know that the Maralinga Tjarutja people were picked up in trucks and forcibly removed from their traditional lands in the lead-up to the tests?' I hesitated a moment and swallowed some hot coffee. 'Their relocation destroyed their traditional lifestyle and culture, and because of their strong attachment to the land, this event is

now embedded in their memory.'

Paul shook his head in disbelief.

'About 1200 Indigenous people were exposed to radiation during the testing. British servicemen, Australian soldiers and civilians were also exposed. The radioactive fallout caused sore eyes, skin rashes, diarrhoea, vomiting, fever, and the early death of entire families. The explosion caused blindness, and people suffered long-term illnesses such as cancer, blood and lung disease.'

'Shocking,' Paul said, his dark eyes on mine.

'Imagine that after fifty or sixty years you are finally allowed to return to your home, which has been used as an atomic test site. Even though it's declared safe, the land has changed. I watched a show where an Aboriginal woman said the land was bare, the trees and grass were all dead and there were probably no kangaroos.'

Paul concentrated on his breakfast.

'Imagine losing a sister in her twenties or an uncle in his forties to cancer; if it were me, I don't think I could forgive.'

'I doubt that any reasonable person could.' Paul shrugged. 'How long did the land remain contaminated and a health risk?'

'Who knows? It may still be,' I said.

'I get it,' said Paul. 'I do.'

'The injustice can't be healed; it extends through time and denies peace to the victims,' I said. 'Anyone who has been subjected to such injustice or who has suffered such trauma would struggle to feel at ease in the world; the horror is never extinguished. How do you regain your faith in humanity, which has already been damaged by generations of mistreatment, then destroyed by such injustice? That's the reality…' I was too upset to speak.

Paul drank his coffee. He seemed thoughtful. 'What about

land rights over the Maralinga land?'

'I think I'm right in saying that the South Australian government granted the Maralinga people title to the land in the early 80s, and in the early 2000s most of the Maralinga area was handed back to its traditional owners, having been declared "safe".' I added air quotes to the last word. 'Emu was returned in the 90s and, in 2014 I think it was, the federal government relinquished ownership of the weapons-testing range, the last parcel of traditional Aboriginal land to be returned.'

'I'm sure I read recently that the local people are setting up a tourism business to take visitors on bus tours through the test sites.'

'I don't think I'll be taking a tour in the foreseeable future,' I said in a hollow voice. 'Do you realise that the British knew in the 1960s that the radioactivity was worse than first thought? But they didn't tell the Australians.'

Paul looked at me in surprise. 'How do you know that?'

'I've known about it for years. There was an article back in the 90s I think, in *Scientific America* magazine.' I polished off the last of my bagel and continued. 'No one will ever know with certainty who in the British government knew about the radioactivity levels but what is certain is that those who knew and failed to divulge the truth committed a crime against Australian citizens.'

'If that's true, it's outrageous.'

'It's true all right, I have no doubt about that,' I countered.

'So, what are conditions like around the test sites now?'

'According to the authorities, the clean-up achieved the safety standards set at the start of the process.'

'Does that mean there's unrestricted access to those areas?'

'Yes, but as a precaution, there's an area of around 400

square kilometres where no one can live permanently.'

'Who paid for the clean-up?' Paul asked.

'In 1993, the Australian government and the traditional owners made representations to the British government.'

'And what did they achieve?'

'The Australian government received an ex gratia payment of £20 million towards the cost of rehabilitating the land.'

'Was that enough? What was the cost of the clean-up?' Paul leaned back in his chair and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

'It was over A$100 million.'

'So the British paid less than half!' Paul said, his voice hard. 'What about the Indigenous people? Did they get anything?'

'Well, it's not straightforward. A British legal firm had hoped to represent one hundred and fifty or so civilians if a class action by a thousand British veterans had succeeded. But the UK Supreme Court blocked the action, saying it would be impossible to prove radiation exposure was the cause of an illness sixty years after the event.'

Paul stared at me in disbelief. 'That's outrageous.'

I held up a hand. 'However, in 1991–92 the federal government made a payment of $618,000 to various Indigenous groups around Maralinga for land contamination. And in 1995, Aboriginal people received $13.5 million dollars from the British government for the loss of their lands. As compensation for the contamination, they then received another $6 million in 2009 when most of the Maralinga area was handed back to help them maintain the township.'

'And how much did they get as compensation for exposure to radiation?' Paul asked, his voice tight.

'To date only five people have been paid a total of $200,000 and claims by fourteen Aboriginal people have been rejected.'

* * *

After breakfast, I walked along the footpath to my car, where I sat for a long time thinking about Paul and our conversation. Why had he defended Menzies when I first mentioned that he should never have allowed Maralinga to be used by the British to test its nuclear weapons?

Driving home along Alexandra Avenue under the canopy of plane trees I was reminded of the differences between Paul and me. He had always been a conservative Liberal voter whereas I was a traditional Labor voter. I identified and sympathised with those less fortunate in society, whereas he respected and identified with people who lived in Toorak and drove fancy European cars. He often regarded people on social welfare as failures, many of whom, he believed, abused or took advantage of the system. I saw them as people in need.

At home, I threw the car keys in the bowl on the hall table and called out to Sara.

'I'm in the lounge room,' she said. 'How was breakfast?' She placed her book face down on the coffee table as I came into the room and I saw it was Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*.

'Unsettling,' I muttered as I sat down.

'Why? What were you talking about?'

'I made the mistake of saying Menzies should never have allowed the British to use Maralinga to test their nuclear weapons.'

'And?'

'He got annoyed.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,' Sara said quietly.

'It really frustrates me that, as far as he's concerned, the Libs can do no wrong.'

'You always say that. Why do *you* get so upset?'

'Because he's like a horse with blinkers; he should consider every issue on its merits.'

'But the two of you have always seen the world differently,' she said, shaking her head.

'When you think of the damage the British did to our land, the dislocation of our Indigenous people, the destruction of their culture and the refusal of the British to take responsibility for the damage they caused, I can't see how anyone could try to justify what Menzies did.'

'All true,' Sara said. 'Did he try to justify it?'

'Yes, of course he did,' I said. 'At first…'

'And then?'

'Well, he softened a little in the end, I guess.'

'There you are, then.' She sat forward in her chair and said, 'Remember, our experiences colour the way we behave and the way we see the world. It may have taken Paul a little while to decide what he thought about the matter.'

Outside, it had started to rain. The branches of the street trees were soon dripping with water, and rain streaked the window; it was as if grey rain filled the world.

* * *

That night I dreamed I was back in Mr Kowalski's cellar. Our family had been one of the lucky ones. My father had got word that the Nazis were doing terrible things to the Jews. At any time of the day or night, helpless Jews were being dragged out of their homes. They were allowed to take only one piece of luggage and a bit of cash, and even then they were robbed of their possessions. Families were being torn apart; men, women and children were separated. Children came home from school to find their parents had disappeared. Women returned from shopping to find their home sealed, their families gone. Everyone was scared.

Mr Kowalski was an old school friend of my father's and

Papa arranged for us to escape to his farmhouse in the country where we remained for the duration of the war. Mr Kowalski and his wife risked their lives letting us stay in their cellar and bringing us any spare food. Had they been caught by the Nazis, they would have been shot for collaborating with Jews.

Our family spent 777 days in Mr Kowalski's cellar. I recall the monotonous rhythm of life down there. At 6.00 am I would hear Mr Kowalski's alarm go off. He'd get up, put the kettle on, and go to the bathroom. After thirty minutes, the bathroom would be free, and it would be Mama's turn. While Mama was in the bathroom, Dad would remove the blackout screen from the windows in the door. Then the rest of our family had a turn in the bathroom. The risky hour was 8.00 am, when the farmhands were starting to arrive. Any noise from us was dangerous because the farmhands were unaware of our existence. There was no doubt about our being killed if we were discovered. At 9.00 am, the farmhands started work in the fields, which were near the cellar. We walked around in socks and had to be quiet. The rest of the morning was devoted to reading and studying.

At 12.30 pm, the farmhands went home for lunch, and Mrs Kowalski came down to the cellar with our lunch. Mr Kowalski usually stayed upstairs to keep an eye out. It was nice for us to see other people and to hear the latest news from town. At 1.00 pm, the radio was switched on for the BBC Polish Service. They were risking their lives to have that radio, let alone listen to the BBC.

At 1.30 pm, the workers returned from lunch and resumed work. After Mama had cleared up the lunch things, she and Papa took an afternoon nap. I used that time for studying or writing in my diary. Around 4.00 pm, they had coffee, and then at 5.00 pm, the staff went home. Mrs Kowalski usually came

down to see if we needed anything and we were no longer restricted to the cellar after that.

In the evening Papa wrote business letters on the typewriter, Mama did administrative chores and helped Mrs Kowalski cook dinner. After dinner, Mama and Papa read, talked, or listened to the radio. Around 9.00 pm, they started preparing for the night.

Every day when the sun went down, the windows in the door had to be blacked out. After that, the cellar fell silent. The next morning, the alarm would go off at 6.00 am again, and the monotonous routine of the previous day would be repeated.

Sundays were different. It was an ordeal to watch Mr and Mrs Kowalski pray for an hour. Then it was time to make the beds, scrub the floors and do the laundry. After a brief lunch break, during which we listened to the news, the cleaning and tidying up continued until about 2.00 pm. After another round of radio news, a music program and coffee, it was time for an extended siesta. Mama and Papa would go back to bed for a few hours. I never understood why my parents needed to sleep in the afternoon.

Sunday was the most miserable day of the week. If I was not required to help, I wandered from one room to the next while my parents did the cleaning, then down the stairs and back up again. Outside, the air was fresh, but in the afternoon, I lay down on the sofa and slept to shorten the time. The silence and the terrible fear of being caught were ever-present. Before dinner, we listened to a concert on the radio. After dinner and the dishes, I was relieved that another incredibly boring Sunday was over.

But no matter how bad the monotony, being sick was worse. I remember one time when I had a cold. With every cough, I had to duck under the blanket to avoid making a noise. Most

of the time, the tickle refused to go away, so I had to drink milk with honey or suck cough drops. I still remember all the cures I was subjected too, sweating out a fever, steam treatments, wet compresses, dry compresses, heating pads and hot-water bottles.

After the war my father stayed in contact with Mr Kowalski and when Papa discovered he and his wife had fallen on hard times and were intending to sell their farm, Papa stepped in and sent them money each month to prop them up financially and enable them to stay on the farm. 'They saved our lives, it's the least I can do,' he would say to my mother.

* * *

Sara gave me a brief, tentative smile as she came in with a coffee for me.

'I think I can understand why Paul refuses to say Menzies was wrong,' I said, taking the coffee and smiling my thanks.

Sara glanced out the window. The rain had stopped, and the sun was breaking through the clouds.

'I think that Paul needs security and predictability to feel safe – look at the way he's lived his life, managed his career… For him, Menzies would have represented all the virtues.'

Sara smiled at me and said, 'I'm sure you're right.'

I sipped the coffee. It was excellent. 'But as far as I'm concerned,' I said, 'I think every Australian should feel ashamed about what Menzies allowed to happen at Maralinga.'