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Preface of
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PREFACE

Bruises and Ink

I was born into a two-up, two-down with no bath and a toilet outside.

To get to it, you crossed an open drain.

That detail matters. Not because it's quaint, or nostalgic, or good copy—but because it tells you exactly where this story starts: on the wrong side of comfort, and nowhere near romance.

The house was number five, Gregory's Row, in the Lowgates end of Staveley, Derbyshire. Colliery country. Coal dust in the lungs, in the curtains, in the bones, 'Spitting is Prohibited' signs in dirty green deisel driven double decker buses. My father worked at the Coalite refinery, and we got regular deliveries of smokeless fuel that burned brighter and longer than ordinary coal. Even so, we were poor. Not theatrically poor. Practically poor.

There was an open fire in the kitchen and another in the front room — a room we didn't go into for years. It existed, but it wasn't for us. The kitchen would suffice. When we eventually used the once hallowed front room the open fire had been upgraded to a gas fire fed by a meter that swallowed shillings one at a time. The electric meter lived under the stairs. I hated that cupboard. Dark. Cold. Damp. Especially dark.

I was afraid of the darkness in that house.

Maybe it was haunted.

Or maybe that's just what poverty, silence, and secrets feel like to a child.

I remember my father once hurling a poker at a rat that came up from the bin area and ran past the door, past the outside toilet. He missed the rat but he hit the door. The mark was there until I left that house at about thirteen. Some things leave impressions whether you want them to or not.

My parents had thick Glaswegian accents. We were strangers in England. Immigrants, really. “Jocks” in a Derbyshire street full of Methodist certainty and collier pride. I was small. Anaemic. Suspect. Different before I ever opened my mouth.

Both my parents worked. I was a latchkey kid — the only one on the street. We were different in other ways too, though I didn’t have language for that yet. My half-sister from my mother’s side came and went. A half-brother from my father’s earlier marriage appeared one afternoon and stayed a while. I saw him for two minutes, and then he vanished forever. Adults knew why. I didn’t.

I was lonely.

I didn’t learn until my teens that I was born out of wedlock. Same mother. Same father. Married later. But that didn’t soften the word in those days. A bastard Roman Catholic in a Protestant street. A poor bastard Roman Catholic at that. A poor Scottish bastard Roman Catholic in England. Each adjective stacked like another brick on my teenage pigeon-like chest.

Because of the double divorce, the adultery, my parents weren’t allowed to attend Roman Catholic church, but they insisted I go. Alone. Every Sunday. I was always the odd one out — even in faith.

When I was eleven, I passed the 11-plus. The only one on the street. Don’t ask me how, but I was sent to a Roman Catholic private school: Mount St Mary’s College at Spinkhill. To get there, I had to walk past the other boys from my street waiting for the bus to the secondary modern. I wore short trousers. A school cap. They jeered as I trudged up the hill to a forty-five-minute ride toward something that felt a lot like purgatory.

Different again. Still not fitting.

Maybe that’s where the contrarian was born — not the fashionable kind, not the performative kind, but the survival kind. The one forged by exclusion, silence, and bruises you don’t talk about.

This book is not an attempt to settle scores.

It’s not nostalgia.

It’s not even confession.

It’s an accounting.

Bruises and Ink is the story of how damage becomes language. How blows turn into sentences. How an outcast learns to make something useful out of being pushed to the edge.

If the ballads are songs, this is the hardened scar tissue.

If the voice sounds sharp at times, it’s because it learned to be.

If there’s mercy here, it was hard won.

These pages exist because bruises fade — but ink doesn't.

Chapter 1: My Family & Other Animals

Bernard Farrell (Known as Benny, later “The Duke”)

My father was born **Bernard Farrell**.

B-E-R-N-A-R-D. Bernard.

His brothers called him **Benny**. Later, somewhere along the line, he became known in the family as “**the Duke**.” He liked nice clothes. Proper suits. Good shoes. He carried himself like a man who believed appearance could keep chaos at bay.

One of his brothers—Hughie—borrowed one of those suits and left town with it. My father tracked him down, wrote to him, and asked for it back. Hughie replied by tracing the suit onto brown paper, cutting it out, and posting the paper suit back to him. That story tells you more about the family than any genealogy ever could.

I always had the sense his brothers didn't like him. Or perhaps didn't trust him. Or perhaps recognised something in him they wanted no part of.

He said he'd been to sea.

Merchant navy.

New Zealand merchant navy, he claimed.

Who knows.

My father was a **billy liar**—but the dangerous kind. He believed the stories himself. He told them well. Often. With detail. With conviction.

I repeated them as a child and paid for it.

He told me he escaped a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp and showed me a scar from a bayonet to prove it. He told me he was at the invasion of Sicily and took four machine-gun bullets in the groin. He told me he served on submarines.. That he joined the army, then volunteered for the New Zealand Navy, then moved from submarines to surface ships.

Imagine a naïve boy repeating that at school.

No wonder I became an outcast.

Children are naïve.

I stayed that way longer than most.

He said he came from a large family. One uncle in Australia. One in Paisley. One in Moodiesburn. Two children who died in childbirth. Whiskey thieves, apparently—burying bottles beside cauliflowers in a farmer’s field so the police wouldn’t find them.

Truth?

Lie?

Some alloy of both.

For the rest of his life when going to work he wore a **black beret**. The military never quite left him. It never does. He walked like a sailor, too—wide-legged, rolling, as if the ground itself were untrustworthy. Whether that came from too much time on ships, boxing, drink, or damage, I never knew.

He lied about his age to my mother. He lied about his past. He lied about his name.

Bernard Farrell became **Bob Farrelly**.

Until I was twelve or thirteen, I was **Robert Farrelly**. Then one day my Uncle John turned up out of the blue, and overnight I became **Robert Farrell**. No explanation. No ceremony. Just a change of name and a silence you were expected to live inside.

How do you explain that to the world?

Interestingly, my birth was registered as Victor Robert Farrell, yet no one has ever called me Victor. I have spent most of my life explaining that discrepancy, as though I misplaced something at birth and have been apologising for it ever since.

There is something in that.

My father stepped sideways from Bernard to Bob. I stepped sideways from Victor to Robert. In our family, names seemed to be adjusted rather than inhabited.

But here is the part I did not understand when I was young.

As a Christian, I have come to believe that God calls me by my name. Not the formal one on the certificate. Not the unused first word on a government form. He calls me Robert.

“My sheep hear my voice... and I call them by name.”

I have never felt called Victor.

But I have come to understand that I am victorious — not by temperament, not by personality, not by strength, but “through Him that loved us.”

Robert is the man.
Victor is the verdict.

The persona is Robert.
The position is victory in Christ.

As I have grown older, I have not changed my name. I have simply grown into it. The persona has solidified. The position was granted.

That is not confusion.

That is grace. That is the grace I live in.

My father boxed—at fairs, in travelling rings, for money. He fought too, especially after drink. He was a small man, but he’d fight anyone, anywhere, over anything.

And yet—

Every morning he left money in my socks or shoes. Enough for a comic and a sweet. He sent me to the shop for chocolate caramels. He checked my wardrobe for monsters. Looked under the bed. Let me climb between him and my mother when I was afraid of the dark—afraid of the ghosts, afraid of the sentinel I was sure stood at my bedroom door.

He hit me sometimes—but not in a system. Not as punishment. It came in flashes, when he was spent, angry, cornered by life. It wasn’t predictable, which somehow made it worse—and also different.

When he was dying, years later, on a couch, stroke-struck and speechless, his third wife calling him a liar and worse, I came home on leave from the navy. He had weeks at most.

I knelt beside him. I could still smell the **coalite refinery** on his skin—the chemicals still lingered. Old leather. Blackened pores. Mottled flesh.

I whispered in his ear:

“Even if all of it’s true, Dad... I still love you.”

And I did.

Because through all the lies, the secrets, the chaos, the contradictions—
my father loved me.

And somehow, impossibly, I always knew it.

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