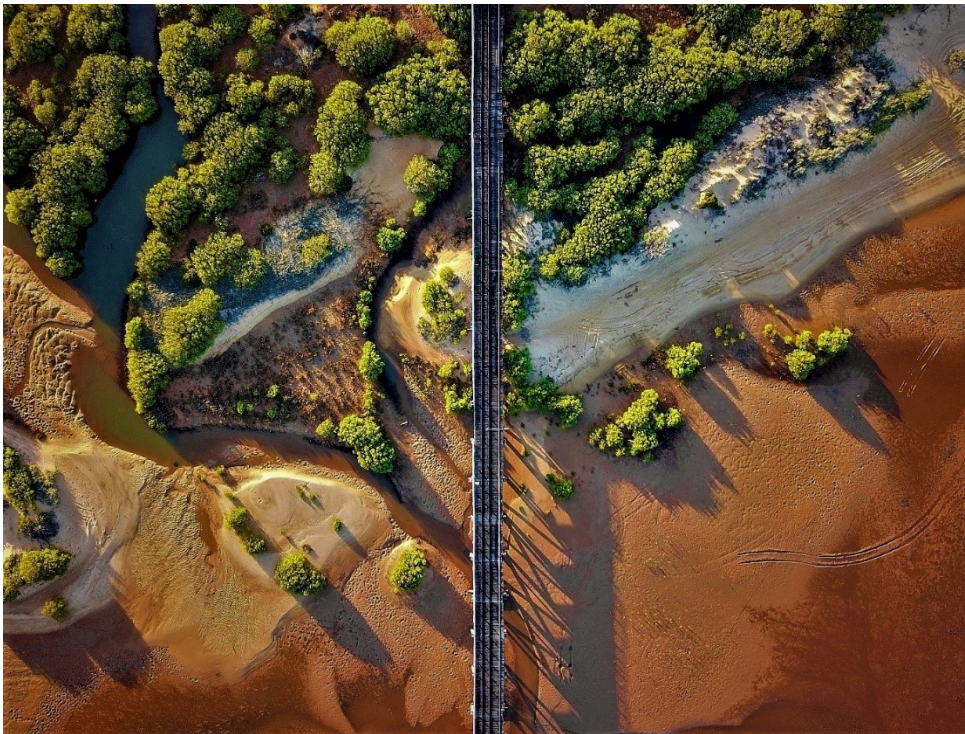


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BATTLER'S BOY

Can you love the father you never knew?



LORNE WALKER NOLAN

Battler

Noun

-An Australian colloquialism that refers to working-class people who persevere through their life's adversities and challenges such as poor jobs, afflictions and lack of respect. They often live at subsistence level.

-It has become a term of encouragement and affection for those at the lowest rungs of society.

For my mother Shirley

Author Bio:

Lorne Walker Nolan was born in Melbourne, and raised in and near St Kilda, to New Zealand parents. He was an English language teacher in Tokyo, before returning to Australia and becoming a prosecution lawyer in the Northern Territory and rural Victoria. He moved to Spain in 2005 and is a legal academic and lecturer in Barcelona, where he is completing a PhD.

Prologue: Where the Outback Meets the Sea

The sea is rough and cold in July, where the Outback meets the sea. The beach sand is a blood red, Outback red. The red of Uluru, Jedda, Midnight Oil's burning beds, The Dreamtime. The blood red sand begins thousands of kilometres east at the base of the blue hazed ranges of the far side of the continent. The green side. It spreads west like a dry red flood forming dunes and flats and dry creek beds with just the occasional homestead, mining or Aboriginal community in its path until it bleeds through the mangroves, under One Mile Jetty and beyond Dwyer's Leap into the shallows of the Indian Ocean.

It is here, the Gascoyne Coast -a sliver of barely habitable land between two oceans - one wet, salty and blue, the other dry, sandy and red- that drew Battler. The red sand is all pervasive - omnipresent. It defines the town and the region. It gets sucked into the road trains' air filters, it gets down miners' and stockmen's boots, it is carried by the dry winds through the doors and windows of caravans at the Carnarvon Holiday Park and the units at Pelican Flats where Battler crashes when he is in town, if he is in town. If he is not away somewhere else.

In town, in the port which pretty much is the town, the crayfish and prawn trawlers wait for a sea swell to finish. It could be this arvo, it could be tomorrow, it could be longer. There are few pleasure boats here at this time of year, or any time of year. Carnarvon is a working port - a working man's port. A couple of thousand people. Five hundred clicks from anywhere.

And when the wind is high, and the swell is higher, and the trawlers are confined to port there is not much to do in a town like this. But there is always the pub. And if you are not welcome at the one you want, then there is always another pub, and if not there then all the other pubs - the fishermen's pub, the truckies' pub, the farmers' pub, the cops' pub, the blackfellas' pub and for Battler in that port, in that week in 1983, it was a chance for one more beer.

1. The Commercial Hotel

The Fremantle Police Court conviction listed my father's address as the Commercial Hotel which is just a short pub crawl away down High Street towards the port. I had been to the west only once before. Back then I had been working as a paralegal with an Aboriginal organisation up in the Pilbara until the heat kicked in, the work ran out and I began to slowly head back to Melbourne for Christmas. The first leg of the journey home was the 24-hour bus from Port Hedland to Perth, passing through Carnarvon and Geraldton and a host of other

coastal villages, stopping only to drop off and collect passengers, not knowing then that those places and that coast were part of my father's story.

This time, on a freezing morning as Perth city filled up with office and construction workers pouring out of the underground into the streets, my luggage had become a bumping burden, so I took the train to Fremantle. The suburbs that flashed past were much the same as any other in Australia distinguished only by the climate and flora, and as it approached Freo the Indian Ocean came into view. Cold and iron grey in these southern latitudes it was hard to believe it was the same ocean whose balmy waters I had swum in just a week before off the tsunami coast of Sumatra. Hard to believe it was the same ocean which my father chose over the one that he was born and grew up near in New Zealand. The same ocean that pulled him away from his family, gave him work, gave him a life, nearly took it away and where it all came to an end.

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A cousin in New Zealand told me that he had heard that my father had been sentenced to life imprisonment in Long Bay in Sydney, so it came as a relief to find out he had not. He had not been convicted of any violent or sexual crimes. While his priors were nothing to be proud of, in my time as a prosecution lawyer I had seen worse.

One count of theft. The sentence was a six-month, \$25 good behaviour bond. Court costs of \$1.90 and restitution of \$1.15. A dollar fifteen was not a lot back then and ever since his police record turned up on my prosecutor's desk in the Northern Territory, I had always wondered what he had stolen of that value and what he was doing in Western Australia. His case was heard in the winter of 1968 not yet six months after my birth - his second son. He was twenty-seven years old and had abandoned us, a wife and my two-and-a-half-year-old brother Rory and I, in Melbourne. Did he have no money? Was he penniless? *We* were penniless.

My birth certificate states my father's occupation as "Butcher" and for many years I imagined him, not that I could ever remember him or his likeness, in a striped apron behind a counter selling pork chops, beef steaks and fancy snags. "He was a slaughterman," my mother was to tell me, "at the meatworks." Not bad money if it made it home. If it was not spent at the Post Office Club Hotel around the corner on St Kilda Road. And while the pub that hot summer I was born advertised *ICE COLD BEER*, we had no fridge at home. My milk was kept in an esky and when the ice melted the milk curdled. It was still summer when my father went to the pub one day and did not return, and we were soon evicted from the flat as Mum could not pay the rent and the bills he had left behind with his wife and children. The young policeman had tears in his eyes as he helped carry my mother's belongings to the street.

Mum got us a place to stay with neighbours and a job at a shower screen showroom. For extra cash she started doing the bookkeeping after-hours. She came home after a long day to find the babysitter and the infant me asleep and Rory, then aged about three, gone. He had climbed out of bed and let himself out the front door. While Mum and half the street spent frantic hours searching St Kilda's dark and dangerous streets, with me in her arms, Rory had been found wandering alone and was handed in like lost property to the St Kilda Police station.

Mum was notified and when she arrived, there he was sitting on the counter wearing a policeman's hat and eating an ice cream. Rory was not handed over immediately. The police separated Mum from her kids and took her into an interview room for questioning. Two kids, strikingly attractive and husbandless, they accused her of prostitution. It was not until the showroom's manager came in and accounted for her whereabouts that night that they let us go home.

I was too young to remember any of this. My brother was three. My mother was twenty-one.

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Now a backpackers, on the Commercial Hotel's webpage there are testimonials from Matt and Tim declaring it "*The best backpackers in Oz*" and saying that they had "*a wicked time*", Chantal adding "*There's something about this place, it sucks you in & won't let go*", although on that frigid winter's morning, it was hard to believe.

My father's criminal record showed that he did not stay long there. He had managed to accumulate a page of convictions across three states but most of them up the WA coast in small towns which I had to look up on the map. A drifter. A modern-day swagman. His convictions were not serious, being more those of a drunken pest. Potentially, but not in his case dangerous, the others convictions read:

DENIS JAMES NOLAN

- Sydney Central Court NSW. 19/4/1961 Indecent Language, £3 fine or 6 days hard labour.
- Geraldton WA. 28/08/1972. Driving Under the Influence, \$200 fine and licence disqualified for six months,
- Broken Hill NSW. 22/09/1975. Driving Above Prescribed Alcohol Content, \$200 fine or 40 days hard labour and licence disqualified for 12 months,

- Elizabeth SA. 3/10/1975. Driving Under the Influence, \$175 fine and licence disqualified for 15 months.
- Jurien Bay WA. 28/11/1977. Driving Under the Influence, \$600 fine and licence disqualified for two years, Giving a False Name (Kevin John Holland), \$10 fine, Driving without Licence \$100 fine,
- Moora WA 5/12/1979. Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol \$800 fine and licence suspended for life, Driving without a licence \$35 fine, Driving an unregistered vehicle \$30 fine, and
- Carnarvon 27/7/1981. Unlawfully on Premises \$100.

The criminal record also noted that he was about my height and complexion, he had scars on his neck and a tattoo of a tiki on his right forearm. It took just one month from his arrival in Australia until his first court appearance in Sydney.

Whatever he was doing in Sydney in 1961 I will never know but certainly he was back in New Zealand within a few years. When I asked my mother many years ago what she had seen in him as a small-town teenager she remarked that unlike the other young men in Bunnythorpe village he had travelled and was thus “worldly”. The theft I had always guessed was of alcohol- perhaps a slab of beer or a few bottles of wine- whatever \$1.15 would buy you in those days. I was later to learn that my father and another fella had been drinking in Fremantle, perhaps at the Commercial, when they ran out of money. Pissed, broke and hungry they stole two roasted chooks and were promptly caught.

The rest? Those of a chronic alcoholic who could not help himself. Five DUIs in seven years in three states. It did not stop him getting around as he kept driving without a licence. Then the cars he was driving were unregistered. The Broken Hill and Elizabeth convictions were part of the same trip he made to Sydney and back in 1975. We don't know who he was visiting. He did not come to see us in Melbourne. We were to have no visits or letters or phone calls from him at all. All I got from him was this story.

The convictions end in 1981 when he was forty years old. My experience in prosecution taught me that most malefactors gave the game away by the time they reached their 40s. Too old to jump fences and run from the cops, too tired of being in and out of court and locked up in the Big House, perhaps a half decent job or a wife and kids gave them a sense of the bigger picture. If addictions featured in their wayward ways, then forty is about the age when it catches up with them if not before. When I thought about him, if I thought about him, I would imagine that he had settled down, albeit not with us, and that he had given up the grog and was living the quiet life. However, I hunched that was unlikely and I was mostly right.

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At opening time, I crossed the road and entered the hotel, this weaving between the university students heading to the campus which had taken over many of Freo's old buildings. The Commercial Hotel was dark, cold and still. It had three floors and the crimson bricks reminded me of the old pubs I was familiar with in St Kilda and inner Melbourne. It was run by several young Taiwanese, one of whom checked me in while asking me where I was from and why I was there. I told her Melbourne, that I was visiting family in WA and that my father used to drink here years before. She thought that was cool.

The lobby was draughty and drab in the winter sunlight despite the numerous colourful maps, tourist brochures and flags that guests had pinned to the walls. The room behind the lobby was even darker and contained a few sofas and computers. Behind that was the huge lounge and kitchen area with the morning news on the TV repetitively informing the viewers about how cold the morning was. A grim young German couple was watching it and eating their breakfast in silence. They did not look at me.

Architecturally it had retained much of its original form following a rebuild about a century ago. Now however, where the walls were not covered in posters for upcoming or long passed rock, pop or comedy gigs featuring artists I had never heard of, or scratchy handwritten notices seeking lifts or passengers for car journeys to the warmer north, "*contact Katarina and Katya in room 5*", they had been hand painted with summery holiday motifs mocked by that morning's weather. My private room was on the second floor and I walked up the ornate wooden stairwell bathed in the light coming through a stained-glass window which created a psychedelic effect on the purple ceiling, green walls and yellow ceiling roses and cornices.

Every old pub has its memories, including the Royal Hotel in Bunnythorpe, New Zealand which my grandparents managed and resided, in which my mother and her brother and sister were raised, in which my father and his father drank, and where we were grudgingly accepted back when we had nowhere else to go. The Commercial was no exception. In its one hundred plus years there must have been thousands of people who had walked in these halls and drank at its bars. Many people must have slept and fucked and fought and died in these rooms over the century. Feeling restless in my room I headed downstairs. It was too early to drink, and I was not hungry and had nothing to cook anyway. The Germans had gone but the TV was still flickering and blaring to an empty room. There were no Taiwanese in sight.

I realised that for only the third time in my life I was in a building where I was absolutely sure my father once had been. All pubs. The Royal, the Post Office Club and now the Commercial. I was his now 50-year-old son, and the realisation dawned on me that my

father's distant memories, whatever they were, were not mine. I could not channel them from these gaudy walls. Wherever he was, he could not share them with me. My blood and place could not intertwine with his experiences and time.

I felt that I was on a fool's errand and that the premise, to know the father who never loved me, who never loved *us*, was bogus and undeserved of him, masochistic to me and a gross insult to my mum who had raised us in his absence. I felt that this trip, the whole trip, was a waste of my time.

As I prepared to leave, the light from the stained-glass window in the stairwell struck me full on the face. The image was two bunches of red grapes on the vine ringed with eight red roses and the words "*In Vino Veritas*" at the bottom – "In Wine Lies Truth". Battler was a beer man I was to find out, but he may have recognised the sentiment. And now the truth of his two lives, the one before the Commercial Hotel and the one after, were about to be revealed to one another. I zipped up my jacket, turned up my collar and headed out into the cold.

2.He Did Everything for Us

Ricky Lovell is the sort of bloke that would cause most people to cross to the other side if they found him walking towards them along the street. Tall, strong, tattooed, pierced, grizzled and heavily bearded, it is not hard to see why. But that would be a mistake. Ricky is generous, kind, a respected husband and father and is well liked by his friends and workmates. Besides, it is unlikely you would see Ricky walk anywhere - he drives, and he rides. He drives his ute, rides his Harley Davidson and thunders down the Outback roads and tracks in his 95-ton, 28 metre Kenworth road train delivering fuel.

Ricky picked me up in his ute parked outside the Commercial and we drove north. The desert wildflowers were out after the rain. On the four-hour drive to Geraldton Ricky told me the story of my father. He had come into Ricky's life in the early 1970s when he was going out with his mother, Pat. A hard worker and a harder drinker, the hardest drinker they had ever known, he was kind to them, nevertheless. Battler ended up drifting around the fishing towns and camps of the west coast, as far away from his wife and kids in Melbourne, and his parents and siblings in New Zealand, as he could get.

My father lived with them for years on and off, coming and going, working on the crayfish and prawn boats and then on the farms in the off season. He was well liked. Pat said he never raised a hand to any of them in the eight years he was with them. But he headed further north when she finally kicked him out after his drinking had become too much.

“We used to go and work with him at shearing sheds, fishing boats; he taught me to drive cars, tractors, motorbikes” Ricky said. He taught Ricky to drive on the Outback roads when Ricky was just nine years old so that he could drink on the long trips. They would swap seats and Battler would drive the last few clicks into town. “He did everything for us,” continued Ricky apologetically. “He never talked about his past. He should have been with you instead of us.”

“That’s OK,” I replied, “It’s not your fault.”

3.El Procés

I was living history without planning to. The greatest convulsion in Spain since the civil war was happening all around me as the situation in Catalonia had come to a head. Barcelona, its capital, the beautiful city by the sea I had chosen to call home, was in turmoil. Tensions had been high since President Puigdemont, as part of the process to gain Catalan independence, decided to go ahead with a unilaterally declared independence referendum on 1 October 2017. Millions of Catalans voted, millions more did not, and heads were cracked as the Spanish National *Guarda Civil* Police Force tried to prevent voting in the referendum to secede from Spain which had been declared illegal by the Spanish constitutional court. On 26 October I was accepted into the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Law School PhD programme. My research topic was *Secession Referenda*. The next day Puigdemont declared Catalan independence and secession from Spain.

The following Thursday I was up late. Wearing by the political situation I was restlessly checking my classes for the next day. Since the declaration of independence, the Spanish government had taken control of Catalonia and Puigdemont and much of his cabinet had fled into exile. I had to teach an important new class in the morning. It was a two-hour legal English class with a group of judges at the Barcelona Court Complex. I had to make a good impression. These were not just university students or lawyers but judicial officers who had passed Spain’s notoriously difficult *oposiciones*, public service exams, to get appointed. Moreover, Spanish judges had taken a lot of flak recently, their neutrality and objectivity being questioned throughout the Catalan independence process. They would be under pressure.

The long day would finish at a university with the first three-hour class of an English for Criminology course. As a former prosecutor I had taught that subject there before, but it was never easy. Most of the students were middle-aged cops with no English at all. Added to this was the tension and rivalry between the various bodies of police heightened by the political situation. On the Catalan side there was the *Guarda Urbana*, the Barcelona City

Police, and *the Mossos d'Esquadra*, the Catalan Regional Police. On the Spanish side there was the *Policia Nacional*, the National Police and the *Guarda Civil*, the Civil Guard. I was looking forward to the weekend.

I got a message on my phone close to midnight. It was my half-brother Jim. I had met him just the once after he had telephoned me out of the blue a few years before to say that he too was my father's son. We look similar. He was born to a woman Battler hardly knew in Perth the year after I was born. Upon notification of her pregnancy he disingenuously said that he could not marry her as he had a wife and children in Melbourne. She gave Jim away to the State the day he was born. He was raised by his adopted family and went into trucking.

Jim would know it was fairly late in Barcelona, so it was unusual to get a message from him at this hour. Maybe he was driving his truck and had accidentally pushed a button. I walked to the other side of the room and picked up the phone from the table where it had been recharging.

The message said, "Hi mate. I think I have found him."

4. The North West Coastal Highway

The bus from Port Hedland to Perth took about twenty-four hours to cover the 1750-kilometre trip back in 1997. If you got an empty seat next to you, had a good book, the air conditioning worked well, and you were not in a hurry it was pleasant enough. I had enjoyed my time working in the Pilbara, but I was glad to get out of the heat and the town where we were based. It was late November and already in the low 40s by morning smoko every day. I hopped on the bus at South Hedland before the day's heat kicked in. It collected a handful of unemployed youths, young miners, backpackers and Aborigines and headed south.

We stopped at Karratha, Carnarvon, Geraldton and an assortment of lonely roadhouses along the way for a piss, a feed, to stretch our legs and change drivers. Although it cooled down the further south we headed, most passengers went back to the air-conditioned bus sooner rather than later to avoid the heat.

These days National Highway 1 highway comes down from the north straight into central Geraldton and it has the tourist moniker of the North West Coastal Highway. Back then my bus swung around the eastern desert outskirts of town, slowing down at Flores Road before turning right onto Mullewa Road that leads towards the centre of town, past the Uta Karra Cemetery on the left. It stopped at the combined petrol station-roadhouse-bus terminal to drop off and pick up passengers and for another thirty-minute wait. We reboarded the bus, and most were soon back asleep.

That stop was the only time I had previously been to Geraldton. The bus cruised back to the highway the way we had come. We headed west down Mullewa Road past the cemetery again, on the right side this time where, in the red earth just a stone's throw from where I passed by, unbeknown to me, my father lay in an unmarked grave.

As the bus left town its lights, the house lights, the streetlights slowly, slowly, faded into the pitch desert darkness. The only light came from the dashboard and the bus's headlamps that lit our way through the Outback. The only noise the occasional organic thud of a kangaroo's final living instant heard and felt above the purr of the bus's engine.

Apart from the driver I was the only one awake.

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Twenty-one years later, Ricky drove me up to the cemetery gates. There were about one hundred people at Battler's funeral in 1983, mostly fishermen, but Ricky wasn't one of them as he was in prison for "unpaid fines". He was told that the mourners poured or threw a few "Brownies", short brown bottles of beer, into the grave. Battler died penniless and money must also have been tight amongst the living as he lay in a pauper's grave until five years before my visit, when Ricky and Battler's best mate Telly decided it was time to mark it.

I had contacted the local newspaper in the hope that if they published our story, some people who knew Battler may get in contact. A journalist was waiting outside and interviewed us. Our story was published a few days later on the front page with the headline "Battler's Boys Meet". Ricky and I are not the only Battler Boys. There's Rory, Jim and Ricky's siblings too. There are whispers Battler also had a daughter.

The article has a photo of Ricky and I beside my father's grave. We don't look in any way sad or bereaved. We had gone through that when we first talked on video phone across the globe when I got the news eight months before. I'm cold in my thin Spanish soccer jacket and with my hair uncharacteristically short after a buzzcut I got in Indonesia. Ricky appears not to feel the temperature. His arms are crossed. I'm standing with my right arm cocked at my side with the same pose I was to notice later in one of the handful of photos I have of Battler.

Four people contacted me in the following days. Three were retired crayfish boat crewmen who had worked with him out of the port and fishing camps. The fourth was the owner of a farm out in East Yuna who said Battler had lived and worked there as a roustabout, cooking and shearing, in 1976. "He helped our young daughter with her reading," she said, "We have fond memories of a very interesting man." "He was a good bloke," her husband added.

Ricky and his wife Jen, who also had known Battler as a child, showed me his old haunts around town. Nothing had stayed the same since his death- not the port, nor the pubs nor the house once filled with kids. A few people we met at the market remembered him and remarked on our likeness. "Oh yeah, I can see it," they said. Ricky drove me four hours north to meet Telly who now lives in Carnarvon. Now aged seventy, it would have been tough to lose your best friend at thirty-five. I got the impression Battler had never been replaced.

Battler had a sister, Veronica, Mum told me. He cared deeply about and was very protective of her. My auntie Veronica had spent her life in an institution. I visited her in New Zealand in 2000. "Do you remember Denis?" I asked, using my father's given name. "He's your brother," I said, "and I am his son." She had not seen him for over thirty years, but she remembered him even if she could not quite figure out who I was. Her eyes welled with tears and she said, "Big boy, big boy" and took me to her room and showed me her dolls. Telly told us how Battler had once beaten the crap out of some pub pisshead who made the mistake of mocking a mentally handicapped person nearby. He told us of Battler's epic drinking bouts. Telly said his partner, Gloria, had saved him from ending up like Battler. He now counselled drug and alcohol affected youths at the small base hospital where Battler had died.

Ricky and I stayed the night. Everyone referred to my father as Battler, not Denis, nor did I refer to him as my dad or father. Telly's house is beside the Gascoyne which burst its banks in 2010. As the water rushed through one side of the house and out the other it took the last remaining photos of Battler with it. They ended up lost at sea as Battler once was. He had fallen overboard from a trawler near the crayfish beds off the Houtman Abrolhos archipelago and was given up for dead. He was found next morning by another trawler, naked and clinging to one of the fishing buoys where he had been for twelve hours overnight. His first request, as they fished him out, was for a beer.

Ricky's mum Pat told me that Battler had been talking about visiting family again. About putting things right. Perhaps this near-death incident was the catalyst. Telly marked the spot on a nautical chart where he had fallen overboard and then said I could keep it. I have it in Barcelona, but I am not sure what to do with it. It remains in its cylindrical container under the sofa.

5. You Were Right About the Tiki

Back in Barcelona, my brother Jim's message continued. "I think we have found our man. I have found a grave of Dennis James Nolan in Geraldton WA," he wrote. "The only problem is they have no date listed, but a birth year of 1945, which is four years younger than our Denis. I am trying to find out more and will keep you posted." I sat down on my sofa and

gave an ironic sigh. I immediately rang Jim, who indeed was driving his truck. It was now after midnight in Barcelona. "How long has he been there Jim?" I asked. "Not sure mate," he replied. He had found the information on a website called Find a Grave. "The name is correct in full, but the year of birth is wrong. It's close enough but it's wrong. And date of death says 1982."

That stunned me. He did not last long. Just over forty years. "Well, it's gotta be him Jim. How many forty something Denis James Nolans would have been knocking around in Geraldton back then? Bloody hell. Probably got pissed and crashed his car into a tree or fell off a boat," I guessed, "or maybe a heart attack," remembering that both his brothers had had open heart surgery.

"Who knows?" Jim replied from his truck. It was morning on the road from Brisbane to Sydney but the cemetery in Western Australia would not yet be open for a few more hours. He said he would call them in a few hours and pass on any information he got.

It could only be our father. I asked Jim to get them to send us a photo of the grave if they could. I recalled the tiki tattoo mentioned in my father's criminal record and I hazarded a guess that there would be a tiki or some Maori or New Zealand image on the grave. By now it was one in the morning. I said goodbye to Jim and went straight to bed. Strangely I slept well and deeply. The best sleep I had had in a long while. Perhaps my subconscious knew better than my conscious self the emotional turmoil of what was lying ahead. When I woke up at 7:00am I turned on my phone. There was a Facebook message from Jim. "Check your emails," he wrote, "You were right about the tiki."

Jim had forwarded an email he had received from the cemetery. I opened its photo attachments. First was a photo of the grave. There was no tombstone but a small bronze plaque on a low concrete base on the red Outback earth. The plaque had a tiki in the bottom left corner, and someone had placed a figurine of the Virgin Mary on the ground. The plaque looked fairly new. It seemed impossible that it was thirty-four years old.

It read:

NOLAN

DENNIS JAMES

“BATTLER

1941-1983

ALWAYS REMEMBERED

R.I.P

I felt numb. Just numb. My no-good dad I had long suspected to be dead, actually was and had been, since 1983. I was only fifteen then. And Battler? He was known as Battler? That was news to me. I had never heard that moniker from anyone before - not from my mother, nor his brothers. Always remembered? By who?

How was I supposed to react? There was no way I could cancel my classes- it would let too many people down. What could I say anyway? That I had to postpone the class as I had just received news of my father's death? They would offer the standard condolences and then ask, “When did he die?” to which I could only reply “1983”. Absurd.

On the plaque his first name had an extra “N”, and the date didn't match exactly what Find a Grave said, but it was him alright. I opened the attached burial certificate.

Date of Death- 22 July 1983.

Place of Death- Carnarvon Regional Hospital.

Occupation of Deceased- Fisherman.

Birthplace of Deceased- New Zealand

Nature of disease or supposed cause of death- Haematemesis.

He had only lived forty-two years. Seven years less than I was then. I looked up haematemesis online. It said:

“vomiting of blood sourced usually from the upper gastrointestinal tract. If loss of blood is significant it is treated as a medical emergency and can result in shock...”

I rang Jim again. He said that yes, the plaque was new and that some fellas had placed it there about five years before. The cemetery had a phone number and would contact them and pass on Jim's details. If they wanted to contact us, they then could. Jim had asked who had placed the Virgin Mary at the grave. They did not know.

I rang my mother in Melbourne. “Well, now we know,” she said calmly. She confirmed that yes, he had had adopted the name “Battler” while in Australia. I forwarded the cemetery email and photos to her and Rory. I still had an hour or so before I had to leave to teach my judges' class.

I thought about my father's death. At 15 years old it was roughly when I started my first real job as a burger flipper at McDonalds. Battler had been dead for the two and a half years I worked there. I quit on my eighteenth birthday, when my bicycle was stolen from where I had parked it out the back. At age 17 when I had joined the Army Reserve, with special permission from my mother, he had been dead for two years. One year later, when I started university, he was dead for that too. At age twenty, a few mates and I backpacked across South East Asia, India and Nepal for four months. He was dead for that – and had been for five years. He had been dead for all the milestones of my teenage and adult life - university, teaching English in Japan for three years, finishing law school, becoming a prosecutor, moving to Spain. He would not, could not know.

I walked back home, grabbed my bag and jacket and rode my motorcycle to the *Cuitat de Justícia*. I got through the day with the numbness still about me. Not a sadness. Just numbness. Besides, how was I to take this news. To mourn the father I never knew? Sit at home? Light a candle? Open a bottle of wine? Better to work my way through it and deal with whatever was to come, whenever it was to come.

I checked my messages when I could. Jim had written saying that he had spoken to a bloke called Ricky in Geraldton who knew our father. It was he who had put the plaque there with his brother and Telly. He had said that our father had been in hospital some months before his death with alcoholic hepatitis and swelling of the belly caused by liver cirrhosis. He was told not to drink again but he could not. In July that year he took ill again and was told he was dying – not in the near future- but then and there as his system was shutting down. He checked himself out of hospital and signed up for a fishing boat. He had nowhere else to go. He started vomiting blood while out at sea and the boat returned to port. Unable to be saved, he died in the company of strangers.

I worked through to the finish of the criminology class at 9:00pm. I was exhausted but had survived the day and thankfully, the university was only a ten-minute motorbike ride from my single bedroom flat on the slopes of Antoni Gaudi's Parc Güell. I felt grimy after a full day in my suit teaching and motoring around the city on my motorcycle, so I undressed and took a shower. It was November now and cooling down, so I had it nice and hot. I turned my back to the shower nozzle and let the hot water spray on to my neck and shoulders. They were rock hard. I stayed under there a long while.

I recalled that when my mother's second husband, my stepfather who I had known since I was a small child, was dying about ten years before, I would hold it all together until I showered, then burst into tears. A friend guessed that the water was washing away the grief. This time, there was a brief shiver of emotion, and then nothing. Nothing came for Battler. I

slammed the shower wall and cursed my brother Jim for coming into my life and dredging up the past.

6.Barceloneta

It was too late to ring anyone in Spain and too early to ring anybody in Australia. Exhausted as I was, I did not want to stay at home. I rugged up against the chill and headed out on foot. The mood in the streets was strange. It had been nearly two months since the independence push had begun in earnest and just ten days since the declaration of independence, and yet all was calm. The central government's taking of emergency control over Catalonia was milder than people had perhaps anticipated, and little resistance was evident. The pro-independence camp was licking its wounds and for the moment, biding its time. For the first time, in a long time, it was business as usual in the streets.

The bar was buzzing, and I sat down at and had a few beers. Jim had made a few calls during the day which I could not answer. I messaged him saying that I had sent Ricky a friend request on Facebook which he had accepted and asked if Jim had contacted our uncles in New Zealand. They, along with Veronica, had not seen nor heard from my father since the 1960s either. Battler's mother died not knowing that he had predeceased her by 17 years. The bar had mostly a local crowd and a few people I knew, but I was not in the mood for talking. The *cañas* of beers did nothing. I must have had that "leave me alone" face on again as the owners gave me a fairly wide berth except when my glass was empty. I left.

Another bar near the Sagrada Familia Basilica is owned by good friends of mine. It was heaving, much more than on a regular Saturday night. You could not move inside, and the crowd had spilled out into the street. All the regulars, local and foreign, were there together with a few tourists. It was mental, like a football crowd after winning the final - pure revelry. For what I did not know. Not politics, as the people I knew there were in both camps. Perhaps relief that the situation had not gotten out of hand.

My friends were occupied with serving the drinks and dinners and had no time to chat. I wanted to tell them my... What was it? Was it bad news? Or just news? Had I told them about my father before? Perhaps when Gaelan, my younger half-brother from my mother's second marriage, came over earlier in the year and I had to explain why he looked so different to me.

My lawyer friend was there, talking with the retired academic who spends his summers excavating graves from the civil war. The Londoner was there too with his partner. They were all my friends, but not that close to tell such news to. I drank some more beers and could sense that tonight was not the night to unburden myself. No one wanted to hear my sob

story. Barcelona had its own worries that week. I was still in a contemplative mood and the relentless goodwill of the bar did nothing to lift my spirits. Not that they were necessarily down but I had a lot to process. I knew I needed relief. I knew I needed to get something out of my system. I did not want to be alone, but this was too many people. It was no good. This party was not stopping anytime soon.

I waved a brief farewell over the ruckus and walked around the corner to an Irish pub which sat on Plaça Sagrada Família, opposite Gaudi's basilica. It was equally packed but much more anonymous as it mostly plied its trade with the tourist crowd. Fridays they had free live bands and that night was no exception. I ordered a Guinness and found a quiet corner.

Now, thirteen years after the death of my stepfather, I had lost my second father. Or was he my first? What was he to me really but a name, a few photos and some other people's memories? At any event he was my biological father and it pained me to learn he was dead, that he had struggled with alcohol and had died young. It pained me to realise that he had been dead for most of my life and that I did not know. It pained me to realise that I would never talk to him, never get to know him, never confront him, never ask him, "Why?"

The music, the crowds and the exuberance of this pub began to grate my nerves too, and I headed outside. The spires of the Sagrada Família were lit up and loomed above the trees of the plaça. They felt oppressive to me as they pierced the chilled evening air. George Orwell observed, when a Civil War Republican volunteer, that they reminded him of melted candles and hated them. That night I could see what he meant. I was unmoved.

I should have grabbed a cheap bottle of wine earlier and stayed at home and got whatever it was out of my system there. I weighed my options. I did not want to stay out, but I did not want to go home either. I left and found a late night *paqui* and bought a few takeaway cans of beers sold after hours, one of which I started to drink, the others I slipped into my coat pockets and I wandered down the increasingly empty streets towards the sea.

I got to the Barceloneta waterfront, on the sea which was as far from the one in New Zealand my parents grew up near, the one in St Kilda where I swam as a child and the one where Battler lived and died off the Outback coast, as I could be. I sat down on the sea wall and looked at the waves gently wash against the cold white Mediterranean sand and my "don't fuck with me today" face ensured the loitering pickpockets left me alone. I finished the beers I had.

7. In Cervesia Veritas

It was about midday when I woke up hungover. I do not remember how I got home. I showered and had a late breakfast. I rang my mother again. A nursing friend of hers had told

her that hematemesis was common in alcoholics. So, it was the drink. My father was a wino, an alko, a pisshead and it killed him.

I made a few phone calls, to close friends only, to tell them my news. I avoided people who had lost parents recently. At my age they accumulate exponentially. Besides, how could my grief compare to theirs? They had lost parents who had loved them and raised them and cared about them as children and adults. All I had lost was a name I had seen on my birth certificate - a bloke I had seen in a few black and white photos. It was not the same.

Still hungover in the afternoon I went to the bar near the Sagrada Familia again, but my friends were not there. They were probably sleeping off a very busy and very late night. I walked to the metro station and took the train across town to Poble Sec. I had lived there years before and had discovered a bar *manolo* on the busy *Avinguda del Paral·lel* that had yet to be crushed by the tourist boom. It had opened over a hundred years before and still had much of the original décor including a bull's head mounted on the wall. "*Una cervesa, por favor*" I ordered. The barmen knew my name and knew I liked the local black beer poured into tall frozen glass *jarras*.

They always had football and as expected the Espanyol game was on. It started early evening and I sat alone and watched my team lose to Alavés 1-0. The bar filled up as it got closer to dinner time and the kick-off for the following Barça game. I stuck around for that too, sitting at the bar rather than taking up a corner of a table and have to share it with other patrons intent on the football, food and conversation.

The bar has huge original ornamental mirrors on the walls, and I caught myself in the reflection. Unlike my older brother Rory, I do not look like my mother's Anglo-Saxon side of the family at all. I take after Battler's Irish Celtic side - I look like him. I look like his brother Bernie. When I went to visit Bernie in New Zealand's South Island, he could not meet me at the bus stop, so he sent his partner instead. She picked me out from amongst the forty or so passengers immediately. "I knew it was you," she said. I wondered if I am what Battler would have looked like if he had lived to my age.

I did not really watch either game. I drank and drank and drank some more to elicit a reaction from myself. I could not just stay like this, sitting around stunned for ever. Something had to give. I took my eyes off the football and stared down at the black frothy liquid in my glass. The beer began to work as I had hoped. "*In Cervesia Veritas*"- "In Beer Lies Truth." Then it came. Convulsions of grief rippled through my chest like an ocean swell, a lump moved up my throat and tears began to flow. But who was I crying for? The father who had left me. Left us all. Who was not strong enough to love me?

Or was I crying for my mother? For the twenty-one-year-old abandoned with two young boys? For me and Rory and Jim – the sons he never knew and who would never know him? Or something else? I turned up from my beer, looked into the cracked mirror and saw my father in my reflected tear streaked face. “I’m sorry, Battler,” I cried. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you.”

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Battler's boys meet

■ Geoff Vivian

He was a shearer, fisherman and labourer who sometimes appeared before magistrates on minor drink-related charges, and everyone called him "Battler".

Truck driver Ricky Lovell said when he was about nine years old Battler started living with his mother, brother and two sisters.

"We always wondered whether he actually had family," he said.

Thirty-five years after Battler died, a professor of international law in Barcelona has come to WA to find out about the father he never knew.

Mr Lovell has been driving Professor Lorne Walker-Nolan around Fremantle, Geraldton and Carnarvon to help him learn about his natural father, and on Saturday they caught up with the *Geraldton Guardian* at Geraldton cemetery.

Professor Walker-Nolan said Dennis James Nolan, later known as Battler, grew up in a small New

Zealand village and married a local girl when she was just 18. They went to Victoria to start an abalone diving business with a loan from her parents, but Battler left her in 1968 after crashing their car and spending most of the money on drink.

She was left with two boys including Lorne, who was just a few months old.

She re-married, Lorne eventually became a lawyer and then an academic, and Battler never contacted them or his family in New Zealand again.

Mr Lovell said Battler had been a father figure to him and he was keen to show Professor Walker-Nolan the places Battler had lived and worked and introduce him to some of his mates.

He said Battler had been good to the Lovell family and was known as someone who would do anything for anyone in the places he had lived and worked.

"He did everything for us," he said.

"We used to go and work with him at shearing sheds, fishing boats, he taught me to drive cars, tractors, motorbike.

"Stuff that he did for us he should have been doing for these guys but there was never any mention of it."

Mr Lovell and Professor Walker-Nolan visited Fremantle on Friday last week, Geraldton on the weekend and Carnarvon this week.

Contact Professor Walker-Nolan at lornebcn@hotmail.com.



Battler's abandoned son, Lorne Walker-Nolan, and the boy he adopted, Ricky Lovell, meet at Battler's grave in Geraldton cemetery. Picture: Geoff Vivian



Dennis James 'Battler' Nolan's grave at Geraldton cemetery.

Petition challenge on bypass road

■ Geoff Vivian

Howatharra landowners are circulating a petition protesting against a proposed route across their properties for the future Geraldton bypass road.

Tenille Webb, who is a spokeswoman for Chapman Valley Highway Opposition Group, said the threat of a bypass had made it difficult or impossible for landowners to plan subdivisions, invest money in improvements or sell.

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The Geraldton Guardian. 4 September 2018

Journey to self-discovery

LETTER

Re: the report "Battler's boys meet" (page 1, 17/8), I visited Geraldton to see the grave of the father I never knew and to meet people who had lived and worked with him.

Denis James Nolan, "Battler" as he called himself, was known to and missed by many in the Mid West and Gascoyne regions.

He died in 1983 aged 42 of the drink and it was not until late last year his grown-up children learnt of this. We are all older now than he ever was.

I thank Ricky, Jen and Pat in Geraldton, and Telly and Gloria in Carnarvon, for their hospitality and for helping fill in the gaps in the life of a man whose latter life was unknown to his family.

Thanks also to those who have contacted me on reading the article. I will contact you all soon.

We know now where Battler was when we were young, what he worked as, and who he was with.

I was reconciled to his abandonment and absence many years ago, and I grieved for his death, belatedly, on learning of it in Barcelona where I live, late last year. It was a difficult time for me.

I told only one close colleague and did not ask for grievance leave as it is such an unlikely story and, besides, I was 35 years too late for the funeral.

Moreover, Catalonia was in political turmoil, my university teaching and studies were peaking at their most challenging and then news from the far-off outback,



Lorne Walker-Nolan as a baby, with his mother, who he describes as his heroine for raising two young boys when society demanded she surrender them.

like a shotgun crack from the past, that left me weeping and longing for home.

Battler was apparently very likeable, helpful and ultimately paternal, which gives me some satisfaction and him some redemption.

Yet he took off and severed all ties — in New Zealand with his parents and siblings, in Australia with two women and three sons: my brother and I and his young wife in Melbourne, and Jim and his mother in Perth.

It was long ago but his absence was as confounding as it was tangible. Years later

in Carnarvon, when told he was dying, he checked himself out of hospital and boarded the cray boat he had been working on.

He had nowhere else to go. He was as far away as he could get from those he should have and may once have loved.

I did not go to Geraldton to mourn him. I placed no flowers on his grave. I am told I take after his side of the family, so I guess I went to find out more about him and, through that process, myself.

We had heard he had headed west, worked hard and

drank harder.

My father lost his battle with alcohol. His sons had to deal with his abandonment, the Lovells with his addiction.

Jim's mother lost her battle with late 1960s Australia's attitude to single mums and adopted him out at birth, but Jim never stopped searching.

And my mother who clung to her two young boys way back when society, church and State demanded she surrender them. She kept calm and battled on and is the heroine of my story.

Lorne Walker-Nolan
Catalonia, Spain