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'See what I made him do'^{*}
**The antecedents, abyss, and aftermath of near-miss
filicide/mass-murder**
A survivor's reflections

^{*} Title adapted from:
Hill, J. (2019). *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Domestic Abuse*. Black Inc.

My presentation today is, evidently, an autobiographical narrative rather than based on a research project.

And a warning—the talk will contain distressing themes including details of a suicide, as well as occasional course language.

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‘See what I made him do’

Armed man amok, dies in car blaze

A middle-aged man with a rifle went on a half-hour rampage around Toongabbie yesterday, then burnt himself to death in his parked car.

<p>The drama started before noon when the man, aged 54, stormed out of the Toongabbie Squash Centre after a heated argument.</p> <p>Police said he followed a squash centre employee to a nearby home and fired</p>	<p>several shots into the front window and wall.</p> <p>He then drove back to the centre with his car loaded with uncapped drums of petrol, and fired several more shots into the crowded foyer.</p> <p>He narrowly missed wounding a group of small</p>	<p>children standing on the first floor, and grazed the arm of a youth aged 16.</p> <p>The youth was taken to Blacktown Hospital suffering from shock, and was kept under observation for several hours before being allowed to leave.</p> <p>After firing into the</p>	<p>foyer, the man ran back to his petrol-filled car and struck a match.</p> <p>Police believe he turned the rifle on himself as the blazing petrol ignited the car.</p> <p>A large group of children was standing directly above the car on a first-</p>	<p>floor landing which burst into flames.</p> <p>No one was injured.</p> <p>The owner of an equipment hire service next door to the centre, Mr Geoff Marsh, said he saw a pall of smoke, and grabbed a fire extinguisher.</p>
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Source: <https://archives.smh.com.au/>

At the outset, I acknowledge that my life has afforded me the many privileges of living in this wonderful country of Australia as a member of the dominant ethnic and cultural group.

However, my early life was catastrophically traumatising ... and I very nearly didn't survive to adulthood.

As a teenager, I came within a hair's breadth of being murdered by my father, who died in consequence of what he intended to be a familicide-plus-suicide, or indeed a mass-murder-suicide. This fatal rampage was precipitated directly by a disagreement between him and me.

However, for me, the principal trauma was not this *denouement*, this final dramatic event. Rather, it was my preceding childhood, which was characterised by unremitting domestic tyranny and abuse, and in the years leading up to the final showdown, a crescendoing anticipation of mortal violence.

So, I ought to start at the beginning ...

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'See what I made him do'



Image source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>

My father was a monster.

He had a singularly extreme paranoid personality disorder, manifesting an all-encompassing misanthropy—a hatred ultimately of all humanity, a hatred that became progressively more murderous.

He himself divulged essentially nothing of his *early* life, I and my family discovered—eventually—from third parties that he had stormed out of his family home as an eighteen-year-old, never again to contact his parents or siblings.

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During a brief career in the military, while living in small-town Victoria, he met the woman who would become my mother. Mum had perhaps the lowest self-esteem of anyone I've ever met. She could never really explain why she developed a relationship with my father. From the little she disclosed, the 'red flags' were screamingly evident from the outset of their courtship—he was ill-tempered, intolerant, controlling ... as well as utterly friendless. Their Adelaide honeymoon—if such a term is applicable—was a disaster. But my mother was somehow already trapped in a loveless marriage.

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Here is my family: my father and mother, my two older sisters, and I (as a toddler).

A paucity of family photos will be evident throughout this presentation. My father despised and as far as possible avoided being photographed. There were no family holidays with snapshots. Although obviously too young to remember, I'm told that he agreed to this photo—taken by a neighbour—only under duress.

As far back in my own early childhood as I can remember, my father had created in our little family home in western Sydney an ambience of intolerance, hostility and menace.

His life was hallmarked by the progressive rejection of all human relationships.

First to go in our family was the older of my two sisters—she was discarded irrevocably from early adolescence, labelled ‘the animal’ by my father, and forced to eat meals alone in her bedroom.

By the time I started school, my parents no longer functioned as a married couple or even communicated with one another, though they continued to reside in the same house. My father commandeered the major bedroom; Mum had been banished to sleep on the living room sofa.

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'See what I made him do'



My second sister was disowned just after her matriculation from high school. With her newly acquired driver's licence and first car, she had shown the temerity to drive my mother to a consultation with a divorce lawyer. My father regarded this act as an unforgivable betrayal—he and my sister never spoke again. And the divorce never happened—proceedings were soon halted because (as we discovered after his death, in his rabid writings), his paranoid ideation extended to his own lawyer, whom he believed to be part of the conspiracy against him.

In fact, he was asocial within and beyond the household. A bookish man, for most of his adulthood he was employed as a high-school teacher, but throughout this career he regarded his colleagues (and most of his pupils) with derision and suspicion, and he never remained at any school for long. On occasion, he established brief, seemingly friendly relationships with work acquaintances and others, but such people were soon inevitably cast aside, based on some perceived betrayal.

During my final year of primary school, the family's domestic circumstances took some unexpected turns.

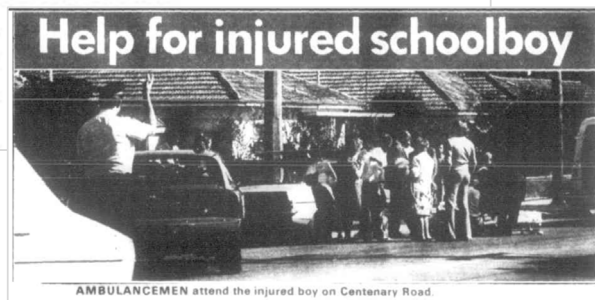
Firstly, my father, having rejected his family (other than me) and abandoning his teaching job, moved (alone) to Canberra, where he'd somehow secured employment with Hansard at Federal Parliament House. In his absence, the rest of us were briefly able to live an unprecedentedly normal and relaxed life: invite visitors, have a TV, play pop music on the radio. My mother regained and redecorated the master bedroom. This was the happiest year of my childhood ...

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‘See what I made him do’

AN accident involving an 11-year-old boy at the Centenary Road-Fairmont Street intersection, Mer-rylands highlighted the urgent need for traffic control, according to nearby residents.

The boy, John Woods, was crossing Centenary Road when the accident occurred.



However, at the beginning of the October, disaster struck:

One morning on my walk to school, I was hit by a car while crossing the road. Apparently, the driver—not realising that he was at a pedestrian zebra crossing had—in a brain fade—impatiently overtaken the car stopped in front of him and accelerated through the crossing. Struck at high speed by the vehicle, I was reportedly knocked tens-of-metres down the road, in the process acquiring a fractured skull, humerus and pelvis. Rushed to The Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, I was placed in an induced coma in Intensive Care.

In physical terms, I made a remarkably rapid and complete recovery from what were initially considered potentially life-threatening—or at least life-changing—injuries. Discharged home after several weeks, I was able to return to school for the end of the year (just!) and to complete Year 6.

However, the event precipitated not only a return to the previous domestic tyranny, but indeed to further deterioration. My father returned

immediately from Canberra, whereupon his abuse of my mother became even more extreme than before. He blamed Mum for my accident—preposterously—accusing her of neglecting to teach me road-crossing skills, despite the accident having been in no way due to my actions. Somehow, he forced *Mum* to pay for *him* to stay at a hotel near the hospital. Throughout my hospitalisation, he passively-aggressively prevented Mum from visiting me by remaining at my bedside himself until the 8 PM end of visiting hours (his antipathy towards her precluding them from visiting together).

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So, I was discharged home from hospital ... to hell-on-earth.

And thus began my high-school years ...

Thenceforth, until my father's death a little over three years later, our little house operated as two separate households: the L-shaped corridor down the middle functioned as an iron curtain. While my Mum and sisters maintained normal relationships with each other *and* with me, I was the sole family member who hadn't been disowned irrevocably by my father. I alone straddled both households, though it wouldn't be correct to describe me as an intermediary or a 'go-between' because there essentially was no communication between my father and the others.

My father re-established the rules of the house from previous years—prohibition of any noise audible from his room, and prohibition of visitors indoors. He rigidly enforced these rules when storming in or out of his room—with a glare, with a scowl, with thundering footsteps, or with a slamming door—but no eye contact.

So, the toxic ambience of our home had a somewhat paradoxical nature—*coercive control but (in Mum's and my sisters' case) without a relationship*.

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‘See what I made him do’



Image source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Squashcourt.jpg>

During this period, my father developed a preoccupation with me playing the game of squash. Although there's nothing intrinsically unusual or untoward about a father being obsessed with his kids' sport, in my case it was pretty over-the-top. The obsession meant that I was forced to play squash (mostly with him, and also in Saturday morning kids' competitions) every day. And I mean essentially *every day*—363 days per year (other than Good Friday and Christmas Day when all the courts were shut). His subterfuge to conceal this obsession was using a different squash centre every day of the week. Unfortunately, I wasn't very talented, and my skills developed poorly.

Throughout my father's final years, my relationship with him was one of absolute, regimented subordination and self-straitjacketing: he rigidly enforced my squash schedule and bedtime. A couple of times, I inadvertently broke the rules. On one occasion, my sister invited me to her evening walk, towards the end of which I realised in a panic that we wouldn't arrive home until a couple of minutes after my prescribed bedtime. "Don't be silly", she said, "we'll be home by two minutes past

nine at the latest". Upon reaching the front gate—literally at 9:02—we encountered my Mum, in the front garden, sobbing and trembling. My father had knocked the back door down in his rage at my tardiness. On this occasion and at least one other, my mother called the police for assistance, but they were unable to intervene in any meaningful manner.

I was compelled to listen to *him* endlessly, but I was permitted to speak little. Apart from the tedious rambling about squash, the content of his monologue to me was often menacing. He very clearly wanted my mother and sisters *dead*. With a sinister, sardonic grin, he would say things like, "Your mother's fat. I've read that fat people have heart attacks. But she doesn't smoke ... Now, how can we make her smoke?", and "Your sisters both drive Volkswagen Beetles [which they did] ... They say that Volkswagens often *roll over when they crash!*"

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‘See what I made him do’



Image source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Squashcourt.jpg>

So, essentially, throughout my adolescence I was alone in my state of ‘survival mode’—the sole direct audience of my father’s paranoia and increasingly murderous ideation—with a burgeoning consciousness that I could not avoid eventually becoming the final betrayer and thereby the last straw ... and indeed, the inevitable outcome was precipitated by me ...

How did the endgame come about?

Despite my rather inferior natural talent, by the time I was fifteen, three years of obsessional-*by-proxy* squash playing had gained me a place in a “Junior A1 grade” team at the centre where, in recent months, my father had taken me to receive weekly professional coaching. Being keen for the team to compete successfully, I invited into the team my squash-playing school classmate Graham, who was more talented and skilled than I. However, I had inadvertently failed to consult my father in advance of the invitation. Enraged because he despised Graham, my

father promptly withdrew me from the team, leaving me with no basis to participate in the season's Saturday morning competition with which *he* was so obsessed ...

When I mentioned the situation with the other members of my fractured family, my sister Heather encouraged me to re-join the team surreptitiously, that is, without telling my father ...

‘See what I made him do’



Image source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Squashcourt.jpg>

At this time, Heather was in most regards a precociously insightful 21-year-old. She was not, however, quite so cognisant as I was of how murderously vindictive my father's state of mind had become, and what the consequences of such an act would likely be.

Fatefully, I followed her advice: I phoned the team manager and rejoined the team. Now, I have neither the expertise nor the objectivity to self-analyse lengthily about my decision-making in this instance. However, for what it's worth, I consider that my momentous decision was a result of *neither principled courage nor petulant rebelliousness*. In every other aspect of my adolescent life, I had certainly been neither courageous nor rebellious—much to the contrary, I could have been (and presumably was) considered a rather wimpy goody-two-shoes.

Several days later, on the first Saturday of the competition, my father discovered what I had done and was incandescent with rage.

Afterwards, in the lead-up to his rampage and death the following Saturday morning, he avoided me, spending little time at home.

Throughout that final week, however, the fear and foreboding in the house was palpable. Fecklessly, I kept a StaySharp kitchen knife under my pillow, fantasising that I might be able to defend myself if he attacked me in bed. In fact, the only contact he made with me in my bedroom that week was to tell me: “Sonny Boy, if you persist in this, you won’t have a father and I won’t have a son”. The murder-suicide intention was unequivocal ... but what could I do?

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On the final Saturday, Heather again drove me, with my father following in *his* car, to the “home game” at the courts where he would die later that morning. (The building, structurally unchanged over the subsequent decades, is shown in this recent Google Maps image).

Realising I wasn’t fit to play, I reserved myself to the bench. As the A1 Team match progressed that morning, my father paced to and fro along the gallery, in silence but plethoric with murderous rage. Eventually, he “shirtfronted” my sister, literally salivating with rabid hatred. By this stage, I assumed that my own life was finished; the outcome was a fait accompli. The first and only time in my life, I shouted at my father: I told him to fuck off. He returned to his silent pacing. The manager politely asked him to leave the premises. He did. My team coach scolded me for using coarse language “in front of the ladies”.

Forty-five minutes later he was dead. So, very nearly, were all of us. He drove home (a distance of around 4 Ks) and waited in his car in the driveway—evidently with a loaded .22 rifle—for Mum to return from her habitual Saturday shopping. Anticipating the worst, my mother didn’t return home following her walk from the shops but instead stopped at

the next-door neighbour's house, from which vantage point she could secretly watch my father sitting in his car in the driveway. Presumably losing patience when my Mum didn't appear, he then drove to the squash centre manager's family home and fired several shots at them through their front screen door but fortunately hit no-one, narrowly missing the manager's wife with babe-in-arms, who'd slammed the wooden door shut when her teenaged squash-champion son, reading a book on the front verandah, had seen Mr Woods coming and raced inside: "I think he's got an axe".

My father didn't hang around to finish off the family but hurriedly drove off. His main game was the squash centre itself, less than a kilometre away. With astonishing courage, presence-of-mind and anticipation, the manager, at home with his terrified family, called the police NOT to his home but to the courts AND also phoned the courts' receptionist in warning.

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A few minutes later, my father drove his car into the internal parking area underneath the centre’s upstairs reception area and recreation room, which at that moment were crowded with perhaps 50 to 70 kids, parents, and coaches.

The receptionist, forewarned by phone, raced to the bottom of the staircase to lock the front door. Moments later, my father, frustrated at being locked out of the building, fired shots up the staircase, missing the receptionist but with one bullet grazing a kid on the elbow. He returned to his car, lit a match to ignite a fuse connecting half-a-dozen or more jerrycans full of petrol with each other and with the vehicle’s fuel tank. He then shot himself through the head, presumably dying instantly.

‘See what I made him do’

Armed man amok, dies in car blaze

A middle-aged man with a rifle went on a half-hour rampage around Toongabbie yesterday, then burnt himself to death in his parked car.

The drama started before noon when the man, aged 54, stormed out of the Toongabbie Squash Centre after a heated argument.

Police said he followed a squash centre employee to a nearby home and fired several shots into the front window and wall.

He then drove back to the centre with his car loaded with uncripped drums of petrol, and fired several more shots into the crowded foyer.

He narrowly missed wounding a group of small children standing on the first floor, and grazed the arm of a youth aged 16.

The youth was taken to Blacktown Hospital suffering from shock, and was kept under observation for several hours before being allowed to leave.

After being into the foyer, the man ran back to his petrol-filled car and struck a match.

No one was injured.

The owner of an equipment hire service next door to the centre, Mr Geoff Marsh, said he saw a puff of smoke, and grabbed a fire extinguisher.

Blazing car: praise for police action

A coroner commended two policemen and two civilians yesterday for averting what he said could have been a major disaster.

The policemen removed five plastic petrol containers from a burning car which was parked near the reception area of the Toongabbie squash centre, Mr L. Nash, 38, was told.

Mr Nash, at the City Coroner's Court, was inquiring into the death of William Allen Woods, 54, schoolteacher, of Canterbury Road, Merrylands.

Constable Stephen Gums, of Westmeathville, who was called to the squash centre on March 10, said, "Constable Burgess and I moved the petrol containers from the burning vehicle. One plastic container was burning."

Senior Constable Brian Burgess said the plastic containers he grabbed from the burning vehicle had wicks and were each linked from one another to the car's fuel tank.

Inside the car was a body, which was later identified as that of Woods.

Constable Burgess said Woods had an obsession about his own plastic squash.

On the morning of his death he went to the squash centre, where he had an argument with his son.

After being asked to leave by the manager, Mr Gregory Enderby, Woods went to the manager's home at Seven Hills and fired two rifle shots through the front door.

He returned to the squash centre and fired a further two shots through the plastic glass doors.

Then he went to the car, ignited petrol over himself and shot himself.

The same shot that killed him ignited the petrol inside the car, Constable Burgess said.

The constable added that prompt actions of two men from a petrol station nearby had averted a major disaster by attempting to quell the fire.

Mr Nash found that Woods died from a gunshot wound to the head with the intention of taking his own life.

Besides Constables Mendes and Burgess, Mr Nash commended Jeffrey Marsh, of Long Road, Kenthurst, and John Clarke, of Crown Street, Glenville.

Source: <https://archives.smh.com.au/>

Simultaneously, a police car raced into the parking area. The two officers, together with tradies working in an adjacent workshop who'd heard the commotion of gunshots and had fetched a fire extinguisher, miraculously managed to quench the blaze, preventing the improvised explosive device from destroying much of the building. The sergeant later told the coroner that some of the plastic jerrycans were beginning to melt with the heat. There had been *seconds* to spare ... (All four of them received bravery awards from the state government.)

Meanwhile, inside, the morning competition now finished, I had been mindlessly playing a muck-around squash game with a younger kid. I was expecting to die that morning, I just couldn't predict exactly how or when. Realistically, there was nowhere to run and hide. My teammate Graham knocked on the court door, ashen-faced with terror. "John, your father's outside; he's got a gun!" More out of resignation than bravery, I calmly left the court and began to mount the staircase to the gallery, anticipating my execution. Much to my surprise, I was greeted from the

top not by the monster, but by Anne the receptionist, who tearily broke the news: "It's OK, John. He's dead."

So, it was all over. My sister identified the partly incinerated corpse, and after providing police statements we went home ... and lived happily ever after.

Well, not quite ...

In fact, although I no longer needed to exist literally in '*survival mode*', my subsequent life has been a struggle with anxiety and avoidance.

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The Monday following the fatal rampage, when I blithely turned up at my school (shown in the photo), none of the teachers seemed aware of what had transpired.

[At the end of a maths class after morning recess, I requested a private talk with the teacher, one who I especially trusted: “My father shot himself on Saturday.” “Oh! Is he OK?” “No, he’s dead.”

My friends had had no prior inkling of my situation, and whatever was whispered among my classmates was not communicated to me.]

Crucially, inadequate mental health support was offered me at that time.

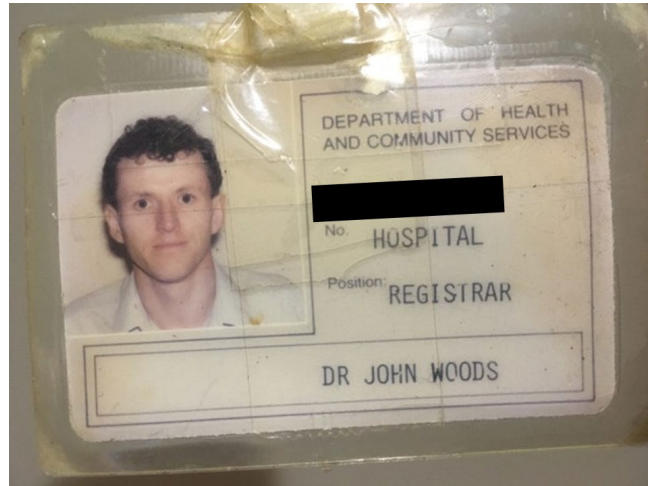
Counselling provided by the school was perfunctory and very short-lived.

To my knowledge, my Mum and sisters were never offered any mental health support.

I struggled through the remainder of my school years, ultimately crashing out of the last two months of Year 12 with a mental health breakdown.

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‘See what I made him do’



Perhaps rather imprudently, following high school I chose to study medicine and spent several years working as a doctor.

However, my performance was chronically impaired by anxiety problems. I dropped out of specialist physician training on mental health grounds, eventually abandoned the profession permanently, and have spent much of my adult life unemployed.

I've also remained single throughout and have attempted to escape past lives by moving between jurisdictions, ultimately settling in Western Australia.

‘See what I made him do’

Learnings

- Risk-assessment for domestic violence-related trauma
 - The overt may obscure the *covert*
- Distinctive *adolescent* aspects of parental abuse experience
 - young enough to remain instrumentally dependent
 - old enough to be perceived as the *instigator* of conflict
- *Lifelong* consequences of childhood trauma
- *Early* support is crucial in the aftermath

What learnings arise from this lived experience?

- * Risk assessment for domestic violence-related trauma is not straightforward: it must incorporate proactive enquiry into covert and long-term aspects of abuse such as coercive control and not be misdirected by selective focus on overt violence.
- * The adolescent experience of parental abuse is distinctive, because teenagers may be:
 - *young enough* to remain instrumentally dependent on the abuser, but ...
 - with their burgeoning autonomy, *old enough* to be perceived as the instigator of conflict
- * Consequences of childhood complex trauma are potentially long-lasting, even lifelong.
- * Early support is crucial.

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‘See what I made him do’

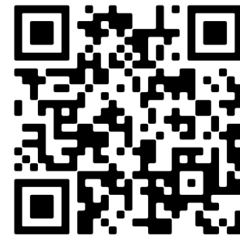
Read my sister Heather’s personal account of the story:

‘His intention was to kill my mother, then come for us’

The Good Weekend (Sydney Morning Herald/The Age/Brisbane Times)

November 11th, 2022

<https://tinyurl.com/HeathersStorySMH>



Thank you—that’s the end of my presentation.

A few years ago, my sister Heather published *her* personal version of the story in a newspaper article, which is still available online via the shortened URL or the QR code shown.