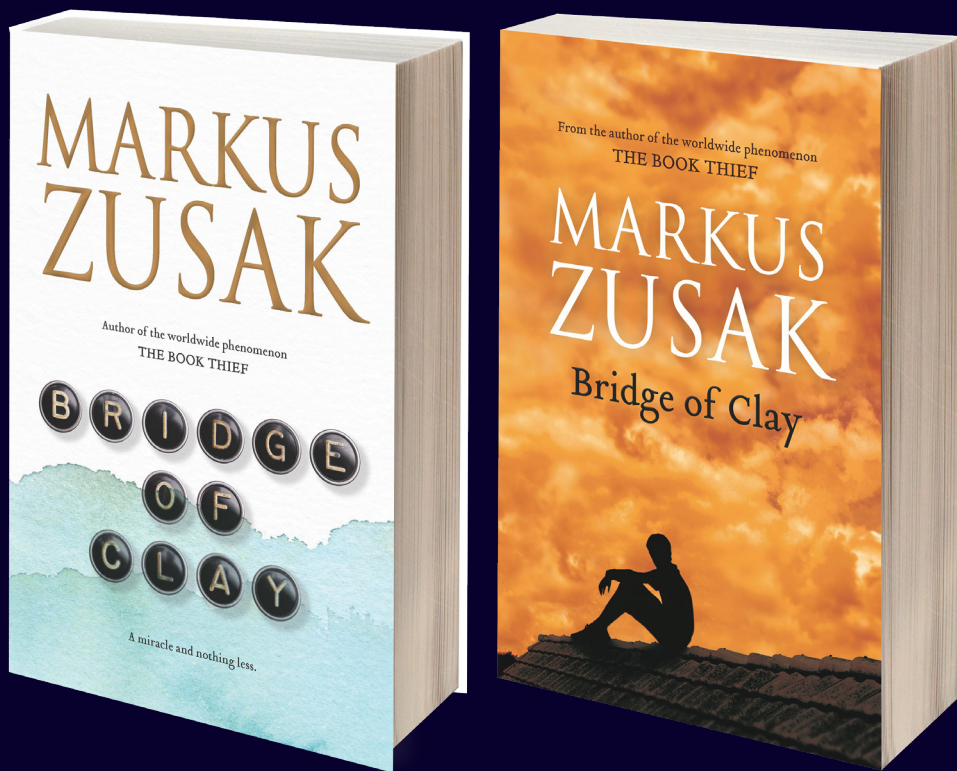


ON SALE 9 OCTOBER 2018



CHAPTER SAMPLER

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growing up the dunbar way

SO THERE THEY WERE, way up in the far-flung future:

A cantankerous bird.

An acrobatic goldfish.

Two bloodied boys.

And look here at Clay, in the backstory.

What can we say about him?

How did life begin, as a boy and a son and a Dunbar?

It was pretty simple, really, with a multitude lying within:

Once, in the tide of Dunbar past, there were five brothers, but the fourth of us was the best of us, and a boy of many traits.

How *did* Clay become Clay, anyway?

In the beginning there was all of us – each our own small part to tell the whole – and our father had helped, every birth; he was first to be handed to hold us. As Penelope liked to tell it, he'd be standing there, acutely aware, and he'd cry at the bedside, beaming. He never flinched at the slop or the burnt-looking bits, as the room began to spin. For Penelope, that was everything.

When it was over, she'd succumb to dizziness.

Her heartbeat leapt in her lips.

*

It was funny, they liked to tell us, how when we were born, we all had something they loved:

Me, it was my feet. The newborn crinkly feet.

Rory, it was his punched-up nose in the first few months, and the noises he made in his sleep; something like a world title fight, but at least they knew he was alive.

Henry had ears like paper.

Tommy was always sneezing.

And of course, there was Clay, between us:

The boy who came out smiling.

As the story went, when Penny was in labour with Clay, they left Henry, Rory and me with Mrs Chilman. On the drive to the hospital they nearly pulled over; Clay was coming quickly. As Penny would later tell him: the world had wanted him badly, but what she didn't do was ask why.

Was it to hurt, to humiliate?

Or to love and make great?

Even now it's hard to decide.

It was morning, summer and humid, and when they made it to the maternity ward, Penny was shouting, still walking, and his head was starting to crown. He was very nearly torn rather than born, as if the air had reefed him out.

In the delivery room, there was a lot of blood.

It was splayed on the floor like murder.

As for the boy, he lay in the muggy atmosphere, and was strangely, quietly, smiling; his blood-curdled face dead silent. When an unsuspecting nurse came in, she stood open-mouthed and blaspheming. She stopped and said, 'Jesus Christ.'

It was our mother, all dizzy, who replied.

'I hope not,' she said, and our father still grinned. 'We know

what we did to *Him*.'

As a boy, as I said, he was the best of us.

To our parents, in particular, he was the special one, I'm sure of it, for he rarely fought, hardly cried, and loved everything they spoke of and told him. Night for night, while the rest of us made excuses, Clay would help with the dishes, as a trade for one more story. To Penny he'd say, 'Can you tell me about Vienna again, and all those bunk beds? Or what about *this* one?' His face was in the dinner plates, the suds across his thumbs. 'Can you tell me about the statue of Stalin? And who *was* Stalin anyway?'

To Michael, he'd say, 'Can you tell me all about Moon, Dad, and the snake?'

He was always in the kitchen, while the rest of us watched telly, or fought in the lounge or the hallway.

Of course, as things go, though, our parents were also editors:

The stories were almost-everythings.

Penny didn't tell him yet how long they spent on a garage floor, to beat, to blow and burn themselves, to exorcise past lives. Michael didn't talk of Abbey Hanley, who became Abbey Dunbar, then Abbey Someone-Else. He didn't tell him about burying the old TW, or of *The Quarryman*, or how once he'd loved to paint. He'd said nothing yet about heartbreak, or how lucky heartbreak could be.

No, for now, most-of-truths were enough.

It was enough for Michael to say he was on the porch one day and met a woman out the front with a piano. 'If it wasn't for that,' he'd tell the boy, 'I wouldn't have you or your brothers -'

'Or Penelope.'

Michael smiled and said, 'Damn right.'

What neither of them could know was that Clay *would* hear the stories in their entirety, not long before it was too late.

Her smile would be hoisted up by then.

Her face would be in decay.

As you might imagine, his first memories were only vague, of two particular things:

Our parents, his brothers.

The shapes of us, our voices.

He remembered our mother's piano hands as they sailed across the keys. They had a magical sense of direction – hitting the M, hitting the E, and every other part of PLEASE MARRY ME.

To the boy her hair was sunny.

Her body was warm and slim.

He would remember himself as a four-year-old, being frightened of that upright brown thing. While each of us had our own dealings with it, Clay saw it as something not-his.

When she played he put his head there.

The stick-thin thighs belonged to him.

As for Michael Dunbar, our father, Clay recalled the sound of his car – the engine on winter mornings. The return in the half-dark. He smelt like strain, long days, and brickwork.

In what would later go down as *The Shirtless Eating Days* (as you'll soon see), he remembered the sight of his muscles; for apart from all the construction labour, he would sometimes – and this was how he put it – *go out to the torture chamber*, which was push-ups and sit-ups in the garage. Sometimes it was a barbell as well, but not even heavily weighted. It was the number of lifts, overhead.

Sometimes we went out with him:

A man and five boys doing push-ups.

The five of us falling away.

And yes – in those years of growing up in that place, our dad was a sight to see. He was average height, slight in weight, but fit and tight-looking; lean. His arms weren't big or bulging, they were athletic and charged with meaning. You could see each move, each twitch.

And all those goddamn sit-ups.

Our dad had a concrete stomach.

In those days, too, I remind myself, our parents were something else.

Sure, they fought sometimes, they argued.

There was the odd suburban thunderbolt, but they were mostly those people who'd found each other; they were golden and bright-lit and funny. Often they seemed in cahoots somehow, like jailbirds who wouldn't leave; they loved us, they *liked* us, and that was a pretty good trick. After all, take five boys, put them in one small house, and see what it looks and sounds like: it's a porridge of mess and fighting.

I remember things like mealtimes, and how sometimes it got too much: the forks dropping, the knives pointing, and all those boys' mouths eating. There'd be arguing, elbowing, food all over the floor, food all over our clothes, and 'How did that piece of cereal end up *there* – on the wall?' until a night came when Rory sealed it; he spilt half his soup down his shirt.

Our mother, Penny Dunbar, didn't panic.

She stood, cleaned up, and he would eat the rest of it shirtless – and our father got the idea. We were all still celebrating when he said it:

'You lot, too.'

Henry and I nearly choked. 'Sorry?'

‘You didn’t hear me?’

‘Ohhh, *shit*,’ said Henry.

‘Should I make you take your pants off, too?’

For a whole summer, we ate like that, our T-shirts heaped near the toaster. To be fair, though, and to Michael Dunbar’s credit, from the second time onwards, he took his own shirt off with us. Tommy, who was still in that beautiful phase when kids speak totally unfiltered, shouted, ‘Hey! Hey, Dad! What are you doing here in just your nipples?!’

The rest of us roared with laughter, especially Penny Dunbar, but Michael was up to the task. A slight flickering in one of his triceps.

‘And what about your mum, you blokes? Should *she* go shirtless, too?’

She never needed rescuing, but it was Clay who’d often be willing.

‘No,’ he said, but she did it:

Her bra was old and scruffy looking.

It was faded, strapped to each breast.

She ate and smiled regardless.

She said, ‘Now don’t go burning your chests.’

We knew what to get her for Christmas.

In that sense there was always a bulkiness to us.

A bursting at the seams.

Whatever we did, there was more:

More washing, more cleaning, more eating, more dishes, more arguing, more fighting and throwing and hitting and farting, and ‘Hey Rory, I think you better go to the toilet!’ and of course, a lot more denying. *It wasn’t me* should have been printed on all our T-shirts; we said it dozens of times each day.

It didn’t matter how in control or on-top-of-things things

were, there was chaos a heartbeat away. We could be skinny and constantly agile, but there was never quite room for all of it – so everything was done at once.

One part I remember clearly is how they used to cut our hair; a barber would have cost too much. It was set up in the kitchen – an assembly line, and two chairs – and we'd sit, first Rory and me, then Henry and Clay. Then, when it came to Tommy's turn, Michael would cut Tommy's, to give Penny a small reprieve, and then she'd resume and cut his.

'Hold *still!*' said our father to Tommy.

'Hold still,' said Penny to Michael.

Our hair lay in lumps in the kitchen.

Sometimes, and this one comes so happily it hurts, I remember when we all got into one car, the entire lot of us, piled in. In so many ways I can't help but love the idea of it – how Penny and Michael, they were both completely law-abiding, but then they did things like this. It's one of those perfect things, really, a car with too many people. Whenever you see a group squashed in like that – an accident waiting to happen – they're always shouting and laughing.

In our case, in the front, through the gaps, you could see their hand-held hands.

It was Penelope's fragile, piano-playing hand.

Our father's powdery work hand.

And a scrum of boys around them, of elbows, arms and legs.

In the ashtray there were lollies, usually Anticols, sometimes Tic Tacs. The windscreen was never clean in that car, but the air was always fresh; it was boys all sucking on cough drops, or a festival of mint.

*

Some of Clay's fondest memories of our dad, though, were the nights, just before bed, when Michael wouldn't believe him. He'd crouch and speak to him quietly: 'Do you need to go to the toilet, kid?' and Clay would shake his head. Even as the boy was refusing, he'd be led to the small bathroom and cracked tiling, and proceed to piss like a racehorse.

'Hey, Penny!' Michael would call, 'we've got bloody Phar Lap here!' And he'd wash the boy's hands and crouch again, not saying another thing. And Clay knew what it meant. Every night, for a long, long time, he was piggybacked into bed:

'Can you tell me about old Moon again, Dad?'

Then to us, his brothers, we were bruises, we were beatings, in the house at 18 Archer Street. As older siblings do, we marauded all that was his. We'd pick him up by his T-shirt, right in the middle of his back, and deposit him somewhere else. When Tommy arrived, three years later, we did the same to him. Even by the time Tommy was four, we craned him behind the telly, or dropped him out the back. If he cried he was dragged to the bathroom, a Horsey Bite at the ready; Rory was stretching his hands.

'Boys?' would come the call. 'Boys, have you seen Tommy?'

Henry did the whispering, by the long blond hairs in the sink.

'Not one word, y' little prick.'

Nodding. Fast nodding.

That was the way to live.

At five years old, like all of us, Clay began the piano.

We hated it but did it.

The MARRY-ME keys and Penny.

When we were very young, she'd spoken her old language to us, but only as we went to sleep. Now and then she'd stop and explain

something of it, but it left us year by year. Music, on the other hand, was non-negotiable, and there'd been varying degrees of success:

I was close to competent.

Rory was downright violent.

Henry might have been brilliant, if only he could have cared.

Clay was quite slow to get things, but once he did he would never forget.

Later, Tommy had only done a few years when Penny fell sick, and maybe she was already broken by then, mostly, I think, by Rory.

'All right!' she'd call from next to him, through the barrage of battered music. 'Time's up!'

'What?!' He was desecrating that marriage proposal, which was fading by then, and fast, but would never fade completely. 'What was that?'

'I said time's *up!*'

Often she wondered what Waldek Lesciuszko would have made of him, or more to the point, of her. Where was her patience? Where was the branch of a spruce tree? Or in this place, a bottlebrush or eucalypt? She knew there was a big difference between five boyish boys and a father's studious girl, but there was still a disappointment, as she watched him swagger away.

For Clay, sitting in the corner of the lounge room was a duty, but one he was willing to endure; he tried at least to try. When he was finished, he'd trail her to the kitchen, and ask his two-word question:

'Hey, Mum?'

Penny would stop at the sink. She'd hand him a chequered tea towel. 'I think,' she'd say, 'I'll tell you about the houses today, and how I thought they were made of paper . . .'

'And the cockroaches?'

She couldn't help herself. 'So big!'

*

But sometimes I think they wondered, our parents, about why they'd chosen to live like this. Most often they would snap over minor things, as the mess and frustration mounted.

I remember how once it rained for a whole fortnight, in summer, and we came home deep-fried in mud. Penny had duly lost it with us, and resorted to the wooden spoon. She gave it to us on the arms, on the legs – everywhere she could (and the dirt, like crossfire, like shrapnel) – till finally she'd splintered two of those spoons, and threw a boot down the hall instead. As it tumbled, end over end, it somehow gathered momentum, and altitude, and hit Henry, a thud in the face. His mouth was bleeding, and he'd swallowed a loose tooth, and Penny sat down near the bathroom. When a few of us went to console her, she sprang up and said, 'Go to *hell!*'

It was hours till finally she'd checked on him, and Henry was still deciding. Was he ridden with guilt, or furious? After all, losing teeth was good for business. He said, 'I won't even get paid by the Tooth Fairy!' and showed her the gap within.

'The Tooth Fairy,' she said, 'will know.'

'Do you think you get more if you swallow it?'

'Not when you're covered in mud.'

For me, the most memorable arguments our parents had were due often to Hyperno High. The endless marking. Abusive parents. Or injuries from breaking up fights.

'Jesus, why don't you just let 'em kill each other?' our dad said once. 'How could you be so –' and Penny was starting to seethe.

'So – *what?*'

'I don't know – naïve, and just, stupid – to think you can make a difference.' He was tired, and sore, from building work, and putting up with the rest of us. He waved a hand back out through the house. 'You spend all that extra time marking, and trying to help

them, and look here – look at this place.’ He was right; there was Lego everywhere, and a scattergun of clothes and dust. Our toilet recalled those public ones, in the time of her spoils of freedom; not one of us aware of the brush.

‘And what? So I should stay home and do the cleaning?’

‘Well, no, that’s not what I –’

‘Should I get the bloody vacuum?’

‘Oh, shit, that’s not what I meant.’

‘WELL, WHAT *DID* YOU MEAN?!’ she roared. ‘HUH?’

It was the sound that makes a boy look up, when anger spills over to rage. *This time they really mean it.*

And still it wasn’t quite over.

‘YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE ON MY SIDE, MICHAEL!’

‘I am!’ he said, ‘. . . I am.’

And the quieted voice, even worse. ‘Then how about actually showing it.’

Then after-storm, and silence.

As I said, though, such moments were isolated, and they would soon reconvene at the piano:

Our symbol of boyhood misery.

But their island of calm in the maelstrom.

Once, he’d stood behind her, as she recovered by playing some Mozart; then he placed his hands on the instrument, in the sun on the lid by the window.

‘I’d write the words *I’m sorry*,’ he’d said, ‘but I’ve forgotten where all the paint is –’ and Penelope stopped, she turned to him. An inkling of smile at the memory.

‘Well, that and there’s really no room,’ she said, and played on, on the handwritten keys.

*

Yes, she played on, that one-woman band, and while sometimes the chaos spilled over, there was also what we'd call *normal* arguments – normal fights – which were mostly between us boys.

In that regard, at six years old, Clay had started football, both the organised kind, and the one we played at home, front to back, around the house. As time went by it was our father, Tommy and Rory versus Henry, Clay and me. On the last tackle, you could kick the ball over the roof, but only if Penny wasn't reading on a lawn chair, or marking that flow of assignments.

'Hey, Rory,' Henry would say, 'run at me so I can smash you,' and Rory would do it, and run straight over the top of him, or be driven back into the ground. Every game, without fail, they would need to be prised apart –

'Right.'

Our father looked at both of them, back and forth:

Henry all blond and bloody.

Rory the colour of a cyclone.

'Right what?'

'You *know* what.' He'd be breathing hoarse and heavily, with scratch marks on his arms. 'Shake hands. Now.'

And they would.

They'd shake hands, say sorry, and then, 'Yeah, sorry I had to shake your hand, *dickhead!*' and it was on again, and this time they'd be dragged out the back where Penelope sat, the assignments littered around her.

'Now what have you two been up to *this* time?' she'd ask, in a dress, and barefoot in the sun. 'Rory?'

'Yeah?'

She gave him a look.

'I mean, yes?'

'Take my chair.' She started walking inside. 'Henry?'

'I know, I know.'

He was already on hands and knees, collating the fallen sheets. She lengthened a look at Michael, and a collegial, *cahootsful* wink.

'Goddamn bloody boys.'

No wonder I got a taste for blasphemy.

And what else?

What else was there, as we skip the years like stones?

Did I mention how sometimes we'd sit on the back fence, for end-of-morning trackwork? Did I say how we'd watched as it all got packed up, to be another forgotten field?

Did I mention the Connect Four war when Clay was seven?

Or the game of Trouble that lasted four hours, maybe more?

Did I mention how it was Penny and Tommy who won that battle at long last, with our dad and Clay second, me third, and Henry and Rory (who were forced to play together) last? Did I mention that they both blamed each other for being crap at hitting the bubble?

As for what happened with Connect Four, let's just say we were still finding the pieces months later.

'Hey, look!' we'd call, from the hallway or kitchen. 'There's even one in here!'

'Go pick it up, Rory.'

'You go pick it up.'

'I'm not pickin' it up – that's one of yours.'

And on. And on.

And on.

Clay remembered summer, and Tommy asking who Rosy was, when Penny read from *The Iliad*. We were up late, in the lounge room, and Tommy's head was in her lap, his feet across my legs, and Clay was down on the floor.

Penny tilted and stroked Tommy's hair.

I told him, 'It's not a person, stupid, it's the sky.'

'What do you mean?'

This time it was Clay, and Penelope explained.

'It's because,' she said, 'you know how at sunrise and sunset the sky goes orange and yellow, and sometimes red?'

He nodded from under the window.

'Well, when it's red, it's rosy, and that's all he meant. It's great, isn't it?' and Clay smiled then, and so did Penny.

Tommy, again, was concentrating. 'Is Hector a word for the sky too?'

That was it, I got up. 'Did there really need to be five of us?'

Penny Dunbar only laughed.

The next winter there was all the organised football again, and the winning and training and losing. Clay didn't especially love the game, but did it because the rest of us did, and I guess that's what younger siblings do for a time – they photocopy their elders. In that respect, I should say that although he was set apart from us, he could also be just the same. Sometimes, mid-household-football-game, when a player was secretly punched, or elbowed, Henry and Rory would go at it – 'It wasn't me!' and 'Oh, bullshit!' – but me, I'd seen it was Clay. Already then his elbows were ferocious, and deliverable in many ways; it was hard to see them coming.

A few times he'd admit it.

He'd say, 'Hey, Rory, it was me.'

You don't know what I'm capable of.

But Rory wouldn't have it; it was easier fighting with Henry.

To that end (and *this* one), it was fitting, really, that Henry was publicly infamous back then, when it came to sport and leisure – sent

off for pushing the ref. Then ostracised by his teammates, for the greatest of footballing sins; at half-time the manager asked them:

‘Hey, where’s the oranges?’

‘What oranges?’

‘Don’t get smart – you know, the quarters.’

But then someone noticed.

‘Look, there’s a big pile-a peels there! It was Henry, it was bloody Henry!’

Boys, men and women, they all glared.

It was great suburban chagrin.

‘Is that true?’

There was no point denying it; his hands spoke clearly for themselves. ‘I got hungry.’

The ground was six or seven kilometres away, and we’d caught the train, and Henry was made to go home on foot, and the rest of us as well. When one of us did something like that, we all seemed to suffer, and we walked the Princes Highway.

‘Why’d you push the ref for, anyway?’ I asked.

‘He kept treading on my foot – he was wearing steel studs.’

Now Rory: ‘Why’d you have to eat all the oranges then?’

‘Because I knew you’d have to walk home, too, shithead.’

Michael: ‘Oi!’

‘Oh yeah – sorry.’

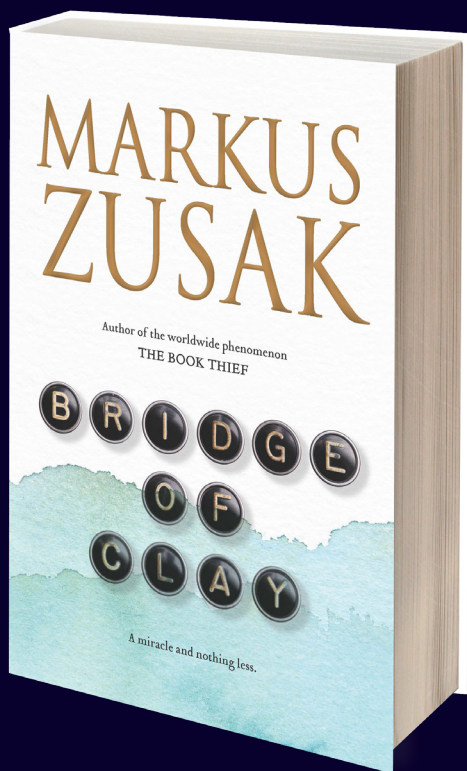
But this time there was no retraction of the sorry, and I think we were all somehow happy that day, though we were soon to start coming undone; even Henry throwing up in the gutter. Penny was kneeling next to him, our father’s voice beside her:

‘I guess these *are* the spoils of freedom.’

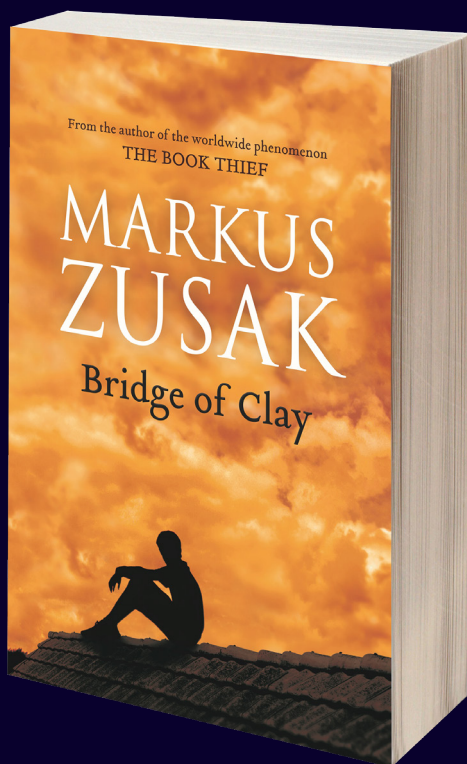
And how could we ever know?

We were just a bunch of Dunbars, oblivious of all to come.

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