

Premiership Quarter

There's this rule in footy that says whichever team dominates the third quarter of the Grand Final wins the Premiership. I first heard about it from my Dad as he stood at the back door, crying.

'Seen three quarters, you've seen 'em all,' he said in a wet voice.

Dad always cries during The Changeover. Heath put down his sports bag and wrapped his arms around Dad's leg, but I stayed put. For some reason my muscles go all tight when I see men cry. Especially Dads. Dad had been drinking VB stubbies all afternoon and was resting a bottle on Heath's crocheted Collingwood beanie like it was a coaster.

'C'mon, loser,' I said, tugging at Heath's shoulder. 'Bye, Dad.'

That was in 2007. I know it was in 2007 because Geelong was up 18.17 to Port's 5.5 at three quarter time and, just like Dad said they would, they won the Granny. Heath was wearing his Collingwood beanie because he always wears his Collingwood beanie.

Though we're both footy mad, me and Heath have never seen the fourth quarter of an AFL Grand Final. This is because when the rules were getting made about how much time we spend with Mum, and how much time we spend with Dad, the judge decided that school holidays should get split down the middle. I always thought Melbourne People liked footy, but there you go. We do The Changeover at five o'clock on the middle Saturday of the holidays: no ifs, no buts. Dad tried keeping us late in 2005 (Sydney 6.5, West Coast 5.9) and Mum called the cops.

Mum's house is at the top of Dad's street, on a hill. You can see the lights on in Mum's kitchen when you're washing Dad's dishes. It's a fifteen-minute walk up and a five-minute walk down and unless it's pissing rain, they won't drive us. By the time Heath and I drag our bags through Mum's front door on Grand Final day, the game is over. Mum does her best to cheer us up; she bakes party pies and sits through the presentations even though she doesn't care about football. But all I can think of is Dad down the hill, watching the celebrations on his own.

I reckon the adults know how stupid it all is, but they're not allowed to say. One year our drama teacher, Miss Cook, saw me and Heath running up the hill on Grand Final Day. I like Miss Cook; she wears long dangly earrings and is always in a good mood. That afternoon was the only time I've ever seen her get mad. Miss Cook doesn't care about football, either, but as soon as she understood the situation she shoved our bags in the backseat of her car and sped up the hill. Teachers aren't allowed to put students in their cars but we were much faster without the bags. We reached the top just in time to hear Mum call Miss Cook a hippie bitch. I don't do drama anymore because when I see Miss Cook I feel all hot.

Anyway, the reason I am telling you all this is so you understand what a huge deal it was to go to Kardinia Park. Me and Heath do Auskick and his team got invited to play at half time during a Geelong game. Mum had the flu and said Dad could take us even though it was Her Day. When I watched Heath run onto the field in his Cats jumper and his Collingwood beanie I cried a little bit, but not in a bad way. He kicked five goals and me and Dad cheered so loud that some Geelong Mums switched seats. When Heath came off the field his hands were blue but he was smiling with both ears. Dad went for hot pies and squirted the sauce just how we like it: mine under the lid with a dollop on top, Heath's in a spiral so every bite has the same amount.

On the drive home Dad played *Thunderstruck* with four windows down. Just outside Colac he pulled off the highway to visit Uncle Terry's house. Uncle Terry isn't our real uncle, but he spent so much time at Dad's place when they were little that they're basically brothers. Whenever they're together they get razzed up like they're kids again, running around and mixing up their words. We knew they'd be a while so me and Heath tried playing Spoons with the stuff on the table, but it doesn't really work with two people.

When it was time to go Uncle Terry made us all shut our eyes and hold out our hands. I thought he'd given me fifty cents but when we opened me and Heath were holding matching football medallions. They said:

BARONGAROOK FNC
1988 BEST AND FAIREST
TERRENCE MCLEAN

BARONGAROOK FNC
1989 BEST AND FAIREST
TERRENCE MCLEAN

'Woah,' we said at exactly the same time.

‘They’re all yours, kiddos,’ said Uncle Terry, scruffing us both on the head. ‘You can give ’em back when you win your own. Won’t be long, from what I hear.’

I grinned in the way Mum says makes me look like a sheep. I was taking a break from Auskick because I bit a girl on the ear.

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It was because of the medallions that Mum and Dad started Fighting again. I told Heath we should leave them with Dad’s present because Mum hates Uncle Terry, but he wouldn’t listen. Mum found Heath’s in his bed and knew we’d been at Uncle Terry’s house. She rang Dad and told him that if it happened again he’d lose all his custardy. When I told Mum that Dad was already pretty skinny these days she explained that this is when you can’t see your kids anymore.

I cornered Heath on his way to the bathroom.

‘You stupid idiot,’ I growled. Mum was doing homework in the next room so I had to keep it down. I put Heath in a headlock and only let him go when he went full floppy. His beanie came off which made me feel bad but also good. I stepped over him, making sure to crunch his fingers on my way. ‘If we can’t see Dad anymore,’ I said, ‘it will be all your fault.’

That was in Round Eleven. In six rounds of football, Heath didn’t leave his room. He said it was because he didn’t want to cause any more problems. He didn’t go to school, or play Auskick, or even come downstairs to watch the Pies. Every time I opened his bedroom door he was sitting on the floor rolling a pair of dice and writing the numbers on sheets of printer paper. It’s this football game he made up – he’s always played it.

In Round Seventeen, Mum took Heath to see the Child Psychologist. She made me go with them. I was really mad because I was finally allowed back at Auskick and was missing training. I whispered in his ear all the way saying *Psycho, Psycho, You’re a Child Psycho*.

The Child Psychologist had a chat just with Heath, then with all of us. She explained that Heath’s got Magical Thinking. This is when you think stuff happens in the world because of things you do, even when it has nothing to do with you.

‘It’s quite common in children of divorced parents,’ the Child Psychologist told Mum. There was a giant bowl of Minties on her desk and Heath and I were stretching out our wrappers

to see whose was the longest. 'Just make sure they know they're loved, and that they're in no way responsible for their parents falling out of love.'

Mum smiled and nodded through the whole appointment but during the car ride home she wouldn't stop crying. She kept saying *I'm sorry, I'm sorry* and out of nowhere she pulled into Macca's and bought us both Sundaes: caramel for me, chocolate for Heath. It was hard to be serious and stoked at the same time but I told her it was okay and even offered her some of my ice cream.

Heath, on the other hand, could not have been happier about his Magical Thinking. All the way home he sat with his eyes shut and his hands folded over his belly, smiling in this really annoying way. He looked like the statue of the fat cross-legged man on Miss Cook's desk.

'Are you gonna eat that?' I asked him, pointing at his half-melted Sundae.

He shook his head and held it out to me.

'I'm a Magic Thinker,' he said happily.

'You're a Child Psycho,' I said through a mouthful of hot fudge.

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Things have been better since then. Heath is back at school and back at Auskick. Mum has been crying less and Dad has been letting us have just oven chips for tea, no vegetables, pretty much every night. The Pies have made finals and Heath and I have been watching all the games together. It's been good.

Last Sunday we went to the pub to watch Collingwood. Dad takes us to a lot of pubs but this one is our favourite because they put brown paper on the tables and the waitresses bring you coloured pencils so you can draw. There's this one waitress Dad knows who is extra nice and brings us all free drinks. At half time the adults went outside to smoke and me and Heath were the only ones left inside. Heath had his dice with him and was scratching numbers on the brown paper.

'Wanna play?' he asked, looking at me with his big eyes.

I don't usually say yes to this boring game but we had eaten all the wedges so I did.

'Okay,' said Heath. 'Guess what number I'm about to roll.'

I said ten because it's the number on the back of my footy jumper. Heath shut his eyes, rattled the dice and sent them spinning across the table onto the grimy carpet.

‘Go check,’ he said.

I climbed down from my chair and when I found the dice they said ❷ ❸.

‘It’s a ten!’ I yelled, jogging back to him. ‘Let’s go again. Ten.’

Heath shut his eyes and threw the dice backwards over his shoulder.

‘Heath!’ I shrieked, running to find them. The one under the table said ❸ and so did the one by the kitchen door. ‘Woah,’ I laughed. ‘That’s so freaky.’

When Heath rolled a third ten I checked the dice, sure he was tricking me. The fourth time it stopped being fun. There was something about the way that Heath shut his eyes and smiled that made me feel all fizzy, not in a good way. When the adults came back in I went and sat on Dad’s knee. He said I was getting a bit big for that but didn’t make me get off.

I didn’t talk for the rest of the game even though Collingwood were on fire. At home, when we were eating dinner, I told Heath it was his last chance to tell me the truth before I got mad.

‘I already told you,’ said Heath. ‘I’m a Magic Thinker.’;

‘No you’re *not*,’ I growled. ‘Right’—I tipped sauce over exactly half of his chips— ‘I’m not talking to you anymore.’

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And I didn’t, not for ages. Mum tried to make me but she gave up after a while. ‘One day you’ll be glad to have a brother,’ she said in a sad, echoey voice. I had followed her into the bathroom where she was scrubbing the shower because Heath was playing dice in the living room. ‘Why don’t you go and set up Monopoly,’ said Mum, pulling off her gloves. She looked tired. ‘You don’t have to talk.’ But the thought of sitting in silence for three hours with Heath and a pair of dice made me feel sick.

When we finally started talking again, it was by accident. Heath came into my room in the middle of the night and I was too sleepy to remember to ignore him.

‘I’m going down to Dad’s,’ he whispered. ‘Come with me?’

In my dream I was having a blinder but something about Heath’s eyes made me say yes. They were bigger than usual and sort of shiny. I put on my dressing gown and followed him out the front door.

Outside it was so dark that I could only see the white parts of Heath's beanie. I did my best to keep up with him but he was cutting all the corners and my Uggs kept coming off.

'Heath!' I hissed. 'Slow down!'

But Heath said we should run. We flew down the middle of the road, not even stopping for the street signs. At the start of Dad's block my dressing gown came unwrapped but I didn't stop running until we reached the house.

Inside, the lights were off but the telly was on. You could hear it from the back door, playing those weird ads that come on in the middle of the night. We followed the noise to the living room where Dad was lying on his back on the couch, fast asleep.

'See?' I panted, squeezing my stitch. 'He's fine.'

If Heath hadn't made us go closer I would never have seen all the little bits of sick around Dad's mouth. They were wet and shiny in the light from the television. I couldn't make my arms or legs work but somehow Heath knew what to do: he yanked Dad's jumper so the sick spilled out on the floor, then scraped out the rest with his fingers. He whacked Dad on the back in a way that looked too hard, and I started to cry.

I don't remember either of us calling an ambulance, but all of a sudden it was there. The paramedics knew us from footy and said we'd have to go with Dad, even though it was Mum's Night. 'You're not in trouble,' they said. 'You two saved the day.'

On the ride to the hospital I told Heath I was sorry for ignoring him. And for not believing him. I told him it's not always easy having a Magical Thinker for a brother, but that I was actually really glad.

'That's okay,' said Heath, patting my hand. 'We're gonna win the Granny this year. And we're gonna watch the whole thing with Dad.'

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The September holidays got switched around that year to give Dad a rest. It felt so weird spending Grand Final Week with Mum instead of Dad. I asked her if we could decorate the house like we do at Dad's place. She said she thinks it's common, even though it's only once a year, and in the end she helped us make a huge COLLINGWOOD 2010 banner out of an old sheet.

At three quarter time the Pies were up 7.13 to the Saints' 7.5. Me and Mum had lost our voices from screaming but Heath barely said a word all game. He was just staring at the television, squeezing his dice so hard I thought they'd explode. Five minutes before it was time to walk down to Dad's house, he looked at me and smiled in this really annoying way.