

'Scaryfying and unforgettable...
A brave and unsettling account.'

TIM WINTON

Lech Blaine Car Crash

a memoir

Lech Blaine

car crash

noun

a chaotic or disastrous situation that
holds a ghoulish fascination for observers

ACT I

THE BYSTANDER

*'No matter how you twist it,
Life stays frozen in the headlights.'*

John Ashbery

Black Hole in the High Beams

There were seven of us: five in the car and two in the boot. We were alive together for the final time. It was quarter to ten on a Saturday night, May 2009 – the Labour Day long weekend.

The trip kicked off in the sticks north of Toowoomba, ninety minutes west of Brisbane. I'd shotgunned the front passenger seat of the 1989 gold Ford Fairlane. I was short and soft-bodied with a black mop, a poet moonlighting as a hoon.

Tim sat back middle. He was broad-shouldered and short-haired like Will, back right. Henry was in the seat behind me, tall and thin. He had the same blond hair and blue eyes as Dom, the driver. Hamish – pale and lanky, with thick black hair – was in the boot with Nick, brown hair above a squat frame.

It was our final year of high school. Tim and I went to St Mary's, a Catholic factory of athletes in the western suburbs. The others went to Downlands, an elite co-educational school on Toowoomba's north side.

Up front there was nothing between the road and me except the windscreen and thin air. The speakers blasted 'Wonderwall'

by Oasis, an elegy inside a singalong. My memory is a blinking mix of lyrics belted out incoherently and the stink of alcohol, sweat and cigarettes – a million things and nothing in particular.

We stopped at a new set of traffic lights. To our left was the city. To our right was Highfields, one of the fastest-growing subdivisions in carved-up country. Nuclear families hid from chaos on quarter-acre sanctuaries, safe from talkback-fuelled rumours of refugee gangs and possible mosques.

When the lights blazed green, we turned left onto the New England Highway. The speedometer rose: *60, 70, 80, 90*. Street-lamps streaked by. The road, half-lit and disappearing, burnt a blur into my brain.

My brand-new iPhone vibrated. A message from Frida. Our courtship was at a critical phase – tomorrow afternoon, we were going to the movies before a party at a mansion on the Great Dividing Range.

There was a swift change in our direction. My gaze shifted between the competing sheets of glass. We'd drifted onto the left-hand shoulder of the highway. The back tyre drifted from the road, spinning out in the mouth of a gravel driveway.

This was the split second of our unravelling.

Dom reeled on the steering wheel, a knee-jerk attempt to regain control. We slid in, out and in again. He'd overcorrected an overcorrection. A stream of images flickered in the windscreen. Road half-lit by headlights. Windscreen filled with branches and leaves belonging to the median strip. A dark front yard at the start of a farm.

It took us three seconds to travel from the gravel back to the maze of nature. The Fairlane ploughed to the wrong side of the

highway. By rights I should've been the bullseye, but the vehicle scraped a tree stump within the median strip, spinning us another ninety degrees.

Screams howled from the back seat as we flew into a flood of high beams. *I'm dead*, I thought. Then it hit: another car, speed meeting speed, like two protons colliding.

I didn't get the luxury of a concussion. There was a glimpse of black as my head reeled from soft impact against the dashboard. After that, everything went berserk. Liquids pissed from engines. Radiators hissed with steam. Car alarms out-screamed one another. Wipers whipped across the shattered windscreen.

The bonnet blocked vision of what we'd hit. A sticky fluid pooled around my ankles. *I've pissed myself*, I thought. My hairy toes floated in the foam from a six-pack of beers. I wiped blood that wasn't mine onto the sleeve of a new jumper and searched frantically for my iPhone, finding it down beside the seat adjuster.

Sick sounds issued from the lips of four friends in the grip of oblivion. Dom lay face-down on the steering wheel. The back seat was a mess of erect necks and flaccid limbs. I reached out and shook Tim's arm, calmly and then much more urgently.

'Oi!' I yelled. 'Wake up!'

This will go down as the loneliest moment of my life.

A heavy guy appeared at the driver's side window.

'Shit!' he said. 'What happened?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Can you turn the car off?'

I hadn't noticed the Fairlane's engine still revving. I reached for the keys, but the ignition was missing. It was hidden in the plastic mess where the steering wheel used to be.

'I can't,' I said.

The man fished under the bonnet and stilled the motor.
'HEY, CHAMP! Everything's gonna be fine!'

The door handle had been obliterated. The window winder was gone. Mine was the only window still intact. I was trapped in a fast-moving disaster, each new fact more startling than the last.

A team of swift Samaritans assembled, divvying the injured between them. An off-duty nurse joined the man at the window.

'Get me out of here,' I screamed.

'Sweetie,' she said, 'I need you to sit still. Is that something you can do for me?'

I nodded dishonestly, no intention of playing hero and staying inside a portable slaughterhouse. I scanned for an exit route and found one through the driver's window.

The woman's eyes went wide. 'No! Don't!'

I pitched my hands into the void across Dom. The first responders yanked me to safety. My feet hit the bitumen with relief. I scooted to the boot of the crushed Fairlane.

'Wait!' said the man, or the woman, or maybe someone else.

The back cavity had been ripped open like a tin of tuna. Hamish reclined against the bumper, eyes closed. A woman rubbed my shoulder.

'He'll be okay,' she said.

I searched below, above and beside the boot.

'We're missing someone,' I shouted.

'Another one?'

I located Nick ten metres away, lying parallel to the fog line, pupils facing up towards his brain. A crooked Z was carved

between hairline and eyebrow. The glow from my iPhone revealed the white shock of his skull.

‘Ambulances are coming,’ said a stranger.

Sirens wailed faintly to the north and south. A dozen genderless bodies moved through the lunar gloom.

‘Hang in there, mate!’ I yelled, clapping to boost the morale of the newcomers. ‘You’ll be right!’

Blood gushed unabated from Nick’s cranium. The lips of a first responder dripped with it, due to performing CPR on an unconscious passenger. The man dry-heaved.

Soon, the dead end of the highway was alive. Cones of red and blue spun on the road like strobe lights. Fire engines. Police cars. Ambulances. An endless stream of hi-vis men and women pirouetted between each other seamlessly. They relieved the first responders of responsibility and herded the bystanders away.

My main impulse was to put some distance between my body and the wreckage. Barefoot, I was careful not to stand on broken glass. I noticed a blue heeler trying to slide its paws into the bitumen and picked up the leash. The animal could be my alibi.

A mob of onlookers swarmed from parked cars and neighbouring acreages, drawn like mosquitoes to LEDs erected at opposite ends of the crash site. Nobody seemed to connect me to the catastrophe.

Beside me was a man in boxer shorts and thongs. He gripped his jaw like it might fall off if he let go.

The dog whined. The sirens went quiet, or I stopped hearing

them. Spotlights glimmered like twin midnight suns. I heard the same ringtone sing from different phones. Ambulances left. Sirens started again. More bystanders arrived, feigning indifference.

‘So what do you reckon happened?’ the man asked.

The Fairlane’s roof was pitched into a tent, doors bent off their hinges. Blood covered what was left of the rear windscreen. Strangers in yellow jackets and white helmets liberated Dom – now conscious – from the driver’s seat.

‘No idea,’ I said.

An eavesdropper strode over. ‘I got right up close,’ she said. ‘Hoons. Kids no older than fifteen, I reckon. *Drunk*. Probably on *drugs*! I just feel sorry for the other guy.’

Only now did I really *see* the other vehicle. It was a blue Holden Viva. The driver was an old guy sitting on the bitumen, face cut up and bathed in blood.

News crews and freelance photographers beat most of the emergency workers to the scene. They were voyeurs for hire, capturing proof of the accident before the trauma cleaners arrived to scrape it from the highway.

The cattle dog was gone. I wandered in the general direction of the city. The vista was a Milky Way of witnesses. Blank faces framed by dark glass. Cars flanked by unlit farmland, no stars in a silver sky. My bones glowed with guilt. Police diverted drivers to the other side of the highway. Horns blew so far and wide they were like a cathedral organ. How had I not heard that shrill sound until now?

‘Are you alright?’ asked a police officer behind me. He nodded sympathetically towards the wreck. ‘You were in the car, right?’

‘Yep,’ I said.

We walked back towards the glowing dome. I hadn't even *left*, I realised, only making it twenty or so metres from where the staring witnesses were cordoned off by police.

'Let's get you some privacy,' said the officer, eyeing the photographers.

We ducked behind some gum trees. The path was red dirt and gravel. Weeds tickled my knees.

'So, what school do you go to?' he asked.

'St Mary's,' I said.

The cop explained that he used to be a rugby union coach at Downlands, so he knew five of the passengers. This was his last shift before retirement.

A female police officer was waiting beside a fire engine with a kind smile and a hand poised to take notes.

'What happened?' she asked.

The story poured out of me in breathless declarations of innocence. 'I was just looking at my phone and then saw the trees and next thing you know we skidded and got hit and I don't know who hit who or which way we were going or whose fault it was *IT ALL HAPPENED SO QUICK* you know what I mean?'

'We know you're still in shock,' she said. 'You don't need to solve everything for us right now.'

The police left me. I sat cross-legged on the blacktop. A shopping bag flapped from a barbed-wire fence like a jellyfish trapped in a shark net.

The police radioed the IDs of passengers, so phone calls could be made to their parents. They eventually returned with a blanket and bottled water.

'You can go home,' said the woman.

Car Crash

I gave them my sister's mobile number. Hannah was asleep half an hour away, but she sounded less surprised to hear my voice than might be expected.

'I've been in a car crash,' I said.

Nothing about my tone suggested anything more serious than a minor traffic bingle, but already Hannah was crying on the other end of the line.

'It's gonna be fine,' I said.

The ambulances had left and most of the bystanders were gone. The news crews kept chasing the most gripping image. The only passenger still at the scene was lying sideways in the back seat of a police car with his eyes squeezed shut. I wasn't tired, but I couldn't bear staring at my reflection in the plexiglass.

Suddenly, my hysterical sister was drumming her knuckles on the darkened glass. We hugged on the highway. I sat in the back seat of her boyfriend's grey Toyota Camry. I was starving and needed to piss, but there didn't seem a sensitive way to mention this.

'The police told me you should go to the hospital to get checked out,' said Hannah. 'They told me there's complications that can come up even if you feel fine now. Lech, they said it's not looking great for some of your friends. What the hell happened?'

My sister stared in the rear-view mirror, seeing a person where a ghost was supposed to be. We had the same big mouths and dark brows. People who didn't know the elaborate history of our secretive foster family told us that we were indistinguishable.

'The car came out of nowhere,' I said. 'Like a shooting star.'

‘This isn’t literature, Lech. It’s real life!’

‘They’ll be fine,’ I insisted, and this seemed to settle the matter for the time being.

We climbed over Blue Mountain Heights and began our descent into the city. It always amazed me how big Toowoomba looked from the north. My home town was built in the crater of an extinct volcano. Streetlamps to the north, south and east of the city streamed into the beaming sinkhole of the CBD. The lights sprawled west before flattening and then blacking out.

‘You should call Tim’s parents,’ said Hannah.

I dialled my best friend’s number off by heart. His blonde, bubbly mother answered the phone. The police hadn’t been able to reach her.

‘Hey, Linda,’ I said. ‘It’s Lech.’

‘Lech,’ she said. ‘Do you guys need a lift home?’

‘We were in a car crash.’

She laughed uncertainly. ‘Is this one of your pranks?’

‘No. He wasn’t in a good way. But he’ll be all right.’

Linda probably pictured a heavy concussion and a broken collarbone. She thanked me and hung up to get dressed.

The Camry idled at a red light beside the Blue Mountain Hotel. In the shadows stood the original Blue Mountain, peak half-eaten by an open-cut quarry. Soon the only mountaintop in the area would be on the neon signage of the run-down pub.

We flew along a silent main street, passing the tree-lined driveway of Downlands on the left. Eighteen months earlier, Nick had been imported there from St Mary’s on a sporting scholarship. Thanks to him, Tim and I had been consorting with the sons and daughters of old money.

I realised that Hannah's frowning boyfriend wasn't driving west, but ahead, towards the centre of town.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'The hospital,' she said. 'Mum and Dad are meeting us there.'

My parents were still officially married but slept in separate suburbs. I hadn't rung them, fearing his anger and her nervousness. 'Why would you tell them?' I asked.

In the mirror, Hannah looked irritated. 'Did you see the news crews at the crash site? Everyone in Australia is going to know tomorrow.'

Toowoomba Hospital became a leviathan at night, shadows filling the gaps. Hannah and her boyfriend waved politely at my parents before motoring away.

The loveless couple stood beneath the red glow of *EMERGENCY*. Mum was frequently taken by strangers to be my dad. She had short grey hair and large glasses. Nobody misgendered my father, a 140-kilogram publican. He had a thick white handlebar moustache and fists the size of wicketkeeper gloves.

'Hey,' I said.

Mum hugged me. 'Baby!'

Dad shook my hand with a nervous firmness. 'G'day, mate!'

Both burned with questions.

'It came out of nowhere,' I said.

'Oh, Lech,' said Mum, 'those poor other parents. We're so lucky. You wouldn't have gotten in the boot, would you?'

'I don't know. Probably.'

Dad nearly spat his dentures onto the footpath. 'Get off your high horse, Lenore,' he said. 'We've put our own kids in the boot!'

Mum touched the blood on my sleeve softly. 'Remind me to

get this soaking when we get home,' she whispered.

We went through the sliding doors. The waiting room was a patchwork of late-night mishap. Babies wailed. A speed freak with dreadlocks and no shirt publicised a grazed elbow to the uninterested receptionist.

'My son was in the crash,' my father declared in his megaphone voice to a line brimming with injured citizens.

Every eyeball focused on me, the unblemished front-seat passenger. An elderly man with a mangled face stepped from near the front and ushered me forward. 'Yaw one lucky bugger,' he said. 'Lucky lucky lucky.'

'Step right through,' said the receptionist.

The pressurised doors hissed and swung inward. I drifted into a hallway fleshed in pale white linoleum. The next hour was a whirlwind of medical professionals pretending that there might be something wrong with me.

The radiologist leaked tears on my bloody jumper before taking X-rays of my internal organs. 'When I heard,' she said, 'all I could think about was my son. Same age as you. You boys think you're bulletproof.'

I was led back to an observation room, where Mum and Dad sat making diplomatic eye contact.

'How'd ya go?' asked Dad.

'Great,' I said.

The doctor asked a series of questions: what was my full name? The date? The current prime minister?

'Is this really necessary?' I asked. 'I feel fine.'

'This is all just a precaution,' he said. 'We need to be extra careful when there's been a casualty.'

The room went silent.

Casualty.

'Someone died?' I said. 'Who?'

'William,' said the doctor, after a pause. 'He passed away on impact.'

'He's dead?' I said.

'Yes. I'm sorry. I thought you knew.'

My brain felt like it had been scraped out and put back in the wrong place. There was no line of thinking that I could link with a distinct feeling.

'I need to keep going,' said the doctor.

'No worries,' I said.

I watched tears dribble from Mum's cheek and land on her green cardigan before expanding. 'Baby,' she said. 'I'm just so happy that you're okay.'

'I'm sorry, mate,' said Dad, under pressure to pluck some words to follow hers. 'That's a cunt of a thing.'

'I'm going to find Dom,' I said.

I found the designated driver in a private suite. Dom had the hint of an American accent from a childhood in Wisconsin. He was shirtless, arm covered with white plaster, blue eyes bloodshot from weeping.

'What happened?' he asked.

In his confusion, Dom had given paramedics the impression that we had been intercepted by the Holden Viva, not the other way around.

'I dunno,' I said. 'It was so quick.'

'Is everyone else okay?'

'I haven't seen them yet.'

Dom's parents arrived. Dry-eyed, I left the reunited family weeping together.

Hamish was in an operating theatre. Henry, Tim and Nick were in Emergency. Doctors and nurses were preparing for three comatose bodies to be air-lifted to distant cities. My friends lay stretched beside one another, brains swelling against skulls, breathing devices exploding from throats. Their shell-shocked families were gracious, saying how glad they were I was okay.

'You silly boys,' said Melissa, Henry's mother. '*Why?*'

I was a mannequin reading from a script of cheap clichés. 'I'm so sorry,' I said.

Of that night, the least fatal details stick in my memory. Shiny ambulances at the end of the loading bays. The shadow of agony around swollen eyes. But I can't remember the faces of my friends, or any final sentences that I said to them before I exited.

What does a survivor do after walking away from a fatal collision with barely a scratch? There are no assimilation programs for passengers like me. We get released from Emergency straight back into the tedium of the suburbs.

My parents sat in the front of the black Ford Falcon, cosplaying as a happy couple, while their son stared at the unlit suburbs slipping past. Everything familiar seemed dreamlike.

'Do you want me to slow down?' asked my father.

'I'm fine,' I said.

We drove past a gaping racecourse and navigated our way through a maze of roads dedicated to trees. *Liquidambar Street. Honeysuckle Drive. Blueberry Ash Court.* This section of town was

brown from drought and considered highly undesirable due to a surge of substance abuse, but the street signs evoked paradise.

‘Nearly there,’ said Mum, with singsong frivolity.

Our six-bedroom home on Evergreen Court was the jewel in the crown of the cul-de-sac. There were no neighbours awake to gossip about my AWOL father’s sudden return from marital purgatory.

Mum got my jumper soaking in a tub of NapiSan Plus. ‘I’ll make a pot of tea,’ she said.

My father switched on the TV. We drank discreetly from dusty china cups that hadn’t touched lips since the household patriarch – the tea drinker – had departed to live in the private quarters of a run-down tavern in a rough suburb.

‘It’s good to be together,’ he said.

The family reunion was interrupted by the jingle of a news update. The 1989 Ford Fairlane flashed on screen. A banner below the anchor’s chin said: *TEENAGERS IN FATAL CAR CRASH*.

‘We understand two of the teenagers were in the boot,’ the newsreader announced.

The montage was tailored for maximum shock value: a gold wreck and a blue one; blood on the shattered windscreen; a close-up of a frothing six-pack; Dom getting extracted from the crushed sedan by emergency workers in yellow hi-vis and white helmets.

‘The car burst into flames after rolling,’ the newsreader continued.

‘You didn’t say anything about a fire,’ said my father.

‘Because there wasn’t one.’

‘What a pack of absolute bullshit artists.’

‘Are they allowed to make stuff up like that?’ asked Mum.

The update segued into reports about bankrupt Americans, Asian swine flu and Australian sport.

‘You’re up to date,’ said the anchor.

‘Stick it up ya date, dickhead,’ said my father, switching off the TV.

My parents watched me polish off half a loaf of banana bread that Nick had left in our fridge after a rugby union game the previous afternoon.

‘I’m going to bed,’ I said.

‘Goodnight, baby,’ said Mum. ‘I love you.’

‘I’m just a phone call away,’ said Dad.

‘No worries.’

There was a two-bedroom granny flat attached to the house, where my musty bedroom sat, at the end of a long hallway. I collapsed onto the mattress and scrolled compulsively from the beginning of Will’s Facebook wall until to the end. I was grinning in his profile picture. We appeared together repeatedly – in a taxi, at a party near the waterbird habitat, drinking Slurpees from 7-Eleven.

During the summer holidays, he had invited me to stay at his sister’s unit in Mooloolaba. The road trip to the Sunshine Coast was my final long drive with L-plates.

‘Keep both hands on the wheel, ya bloody lunatic,’ my father had roared, as I drifted carelessly onto the rumble strips of a six-lane highway at 110 kilometres an hour.

The unit was part of an old duplex. Will, Henry, Dom, Nick and I sat on tattered couches in the garage and drank beers from

an esky until the ice thawed into lukewarm water. We had roughly eleven months to go before a nationwide coming-of-age ritual.

‘I wish Schoolies started tomorrow,’ said Nick.

‘Patience, mate,’ said Henry. ‘Patience!’

‘Remember: it’s about the journey, boys,’ said Will, while peeling the label from a finished stubbie. ‘Not the destination.’

‘Let’s go to the beach,’ said Dom.

‘*Let’s go to the beach,*’ said Henry, a budding actor, in a pitch-perfect impersonation of Dom’s accent.

‘That’s not what I sound like!’ Dom protested.

‘*That’s not what I sound like!*’ mimicked Nick, in a rendition much worse than Henry’s.

At the beach, there was a white moon in a navy sky, making the water look like TV static. Night waves sprayed white noise far and wide. I was afraid that my decision to stay at St Mary’s might leave me out of the summer to come. ‘Sorry to be a dog,’ I said.

‘Who gives a shit?’ said Will. ‘You’re one of us.’

Will picked up the guitar and strummed Pearl Jam songs until the sky dimmed into a cartoonish blueness.

Now Will was dead. What would the audience think of me, the survivor, if I didn’t express grief without delay? At 3:10 am, I posted my first post-crash Facebook status.

RIP Will . . . You can pull through boys!

In the cautious morning, before sleep, I relived the vivid string of minutes that delivered me to the headlights.

At seventeen, Lech Blaine walked away unharmed from a car crash that killed three of his friends and left two in comas.

On a May night in 2009, seven boys in Toowoomba, Queensland, piled into a car. They never arrived at their destination. The driver made a routine error, leading to a head-on collision.

In the aftermath, rumours about speed and drink driving erupted. There was intense scrutiny from media and police. Lech used alcohol to numb his grief and social media to show stoicism, while secretly spiralling towards depression and disgrace.

This is a riveting account of family, friendship, grief and love after tragedy. In a country where class and sport dominate, and car crashes compete with floods and pandemics for headlines, our connection with others is what propels us on. Heartbreaking and darkly hilarious, *Car Crash* is a story for our times.

'A heartsoaring act of literary bravery
where the ongoing cost of experience
is exposed in every note-perfect sentence...
Some books just have to be written.
And some books just have to be read.'

TRENT DALTON



Lech Blaine is a writer from Toowoomba, now based in Sydney. His work appears widely, including in *The Best Australian Essays*, *Meanjin*, *The Guardian* and *The Monthly*. An inaugural *Griffith Review* Queensland Writing Fellow, he won the 2017 Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award and the 2019 Brisbane Lord Mayor's Emerging Artist Fellowship.

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