

markus
zusak

Author of
THE BOOK THIEF

bridge
of
clay

a novel

ALSO BY MARKUS ZUSAK

The Book Thief
I Am the Messenger

markus
zusak

bridge
of
clay



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For Scout, Kid, and Little Small,
for Cate,
and in loving memory of K.E.:
a great lover of *language*

before the beginning
the old tw

In the beginning there was one murderer, one mule and one boy, but this isn't the beginning, it's before it, it's me, and I'm Matthew, and here I am, in the kitchen, in the night—the old river mouth of light—and I'm punching and punching away. The house is quiet around me.

As it is, everyone else is asleep.

I'm at the kitchen table.

It's me and the typewriter—me and the old TW, as our long-lost father said our long-lost grandmother used to say. Actually, she'd called it the *ol'* TW, but such quirks have never been me. Me, I'm known for bruises and levelheadedness, for height and muscle and blasphemy, and the occasional sentimentality. If you're like most people, you'll wonder if I'd bother stringing a sentence together, let alone know anything about the epics, or the Greeks. Sometimes it's good to be underestimated that way, but even better when someone sees it. In my case, I was lucky:

For me there was Claudia Kirkby.

There was a boy and a son and a brother.

Yes, always for us there was a brother, and he was the one—the one of us amongst five of us—who took all of it on his shoulder. As ever, he'd told me quietly, and deliberately, and of course he was on the money. There *was* an old typewriter buried in the old backyard of an old-backyard-of-a-town, but I'd had to get my measurements right, or I might dig up a dead dog or a snake instead (which I did, on both counts). I figured if the dog was there and the snake was there, the typewriter couldn't be far.

It was perfect, pirateless treasure.

—

I'd driven out the day after my wedding day.

Out from the city.

Right through the night.

Out through the reams of empty space, and then some.

The town itself was a hard, distant storyland; you could see it from afar. There was all the straw-like landscape, and marathons of sky. Around it, a wilderness of low scrub and gum trees stood close by, and it was true, it was so damn true: the people sloped and slouched. This world had worn them down.

It was outside the bank, next to one of the many pubs, that a woman told me the way. She was the uprightest woman in town.

“Go left there on Turnstile Street, right? Then straight for say two hundred meters, then left again.”

She was brown-haired, well-dressed, in jeans and boots, plain red shirt, an eye shut tight to the sun. The only thing betraying her was an inverse triangle of skin, there at the base of her neck; it was tired and old and crisscrossed, like the handle of a leather chest.

“You got it, then?”

“Got it.”

“What number you lookin’ for, anyway?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Oh, you’re after the old Merchisons, are you?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, not really.”

The woman came closer and I noted the teeth of her now, how they were white-and-gleaming-but-yellow; a lot like the swaggering sun. As she approached, I held my hand out, and there was she and I and her teeth and town.

“My name’s Matthew,” I said, and the woman, she was Daphne.

By the time I was at the car again, she’d turned and come back, from the money machine at the bank. She’d even left her card behind, and stood there now, with a hand at center-hip. I was halfway into the driver’s side and Daphne nodded and knew. She knew near to almost everything, like a woman reading the news.

“Matthew Dunbar.”

She said it, she didn’t ask.

There I was, twelve hours from home, in a town I'd never set foot in in all my thirty-one years, and they'd all been somehow expecting me.

—

It was a long time we looked at each other then, a few seconds at least, and all was broad and open. People appeared, and wandered the street.

I said, "What else do you know? Do you know I'm here for the typewriter?"

She opened the other eye.

She braved the midday sun.

"Typewriter?" Now I'd totally confused her. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

Almost on cue, an old guy started shouting, asking if it was her bloody card holding up bloody traffic at the bloody bank machine, and she ran back up to retrieve it. Maybe I could have explained—that there *was* an old TW in all this story, back when they used typewriters in doctors' surgeries, and secretaries bashed at the keys. Whether or not she was interested, I'll never know. What I do know is that her directions were spot-on.

Miller Street:

A quiet assembly line of small, polite houses, all baking in the heat. I parked the car, I shut the door, and crossed the crispy lawn.

—

It was right about then I regretted not bringing the girl I'd just married—or actually, the woman, and mother of my two daughters—and of course, the daughters themselves. Those kids, they would have loved this place, they'd have walked and skipped and danced here, all legs and sunny hair. They'd have cartwheeled the lawn, shouting, "And don't go lookin' at our knickers, right?"

Some honeymoon:

Claudia was at work.

The girls were at school.

Part of me still liked that, of course; a lot of me liked it a lot.

I breathed in, and out, and knocked.

—

Inside, the house was oven-like.

The furniture all was roasted.

The pictures just out of the toaster.

They had an air conditioner. It was broken.

There was tea and Scotch Fingers, and sun clapped hard at the window. There was ample sweat at the table. It dripped from arm to cloth.

As for the Merchisons, they were honest, hairy people.

They were a blue singlet of a man, with great big sideburns, like fur coat meat cleavers on his cheeks, and a woman named Raelene. She wore pearl earrings, tight curls, and held a handbag. She was perennially going to the shops, but stayed. From the moment I mentioned the backyard and that something might be buried there, she'd had to hang around. When the tea was done and the biscuits reduced to a nub, I faced the sideburns, front-on. He spoke to me fair and squarely:

“Guess we should get to work.”

—

Outside, in the long dry yard, I walked left, toward the clothesline, and a weathered, dying banksia. I looked back for a moment behind me: the small house, the tin roof. The sun was still all over it, but reclining, leaning west. I dug with shovel and hands, and there it was.

“Goddamn!”

The dog.

Again.

“Goddamn!”

The snake.

Both of them nothing but bones.

We combed them close and careful.

We placed them on the lawn.

“Well, I’ll be!”

The man said it three times, but loudest of all when at last I’d found the old Remington, bullet-grey. A weapon in the ground, it was wrapped in three rounds of tough plastic, so clear I could see the keys: first the Q and the W, then the midsection of F and G, H and J.

For a while I looked at it; I just looked:

Those black keys, like monsters’ teeth, but friendly.

Finally, I reached in and hauled it out, with careful, dirty hands; I filled in all three holes. We took it out of the packaging, and watched and crouched, to examine it.

“A hell of a thing,” said Mr. Merchison. The fur coat cleavers were twitching.

“It is,” I agreed, it was glorious.

“I didn’t think *this* was going to happen when I woke up this morning.” He picked it up, and handed it across.

“You want to stay for dinner, Matthew?”

That was the old lady, still half astonished. Astonishment didn’t trump dinner.

I looked up from my crouching stance. “Thanks, Mrs. Merchison, but I’m hurting from all those biscuits.” Again, I eyed the house. It was parceled up now, in shade. “I should actually get going.” I shook the hand of each of them. “I can’t thank you enough.” I began to walk on, the typewriter safe in my arms.

Mr. Merchison was having none of it.

He called out a forthright “Oi!”

And what else could I do?

There must have been good reason for unearthing the two animals, and I turned from under the clothesline—the tired old Hills Hoist, just like ours—and waited for what he would say; and he said it.

“Aren’t you forgetting something there, mate?”

He nodded to the dog bones and the snake.

—

And that was how I drove away.

In the back seat of my old station wagon that day were the skeletal remains of a dog, one typewriter, and the wiry boneline of a king brown snake.

About halfway, I pulled over. There was a place I knew—a small detour, with a bed and proper rest—but I decided not to take it. Instead, I lay in the car with the snake there at my neck. As I drifted off, I thought how before-the-beginnings are everywhere—because before and before so many things there was a boy in that old-backyard-of-a-town, and he’d kneeled on the ground when the snake had killed that dog, and the dog had killed that snake...but that’s all still to come.

No, for now, this is all you need:

I made it home the next day.

I made it back to the city, to Archer Street, where everything *did* begin, and went many and varied ways. The argument about just why in the hell I’d brought back the dog and the snake dissipated hours ago, and those who were to leave have left, and those to stay have stayed. Arguing upon return with Rory about the contents of the car’s back seat was the icing on the cake. Rory, of all the people. He, as much as anyone, knows who and why and what we are:

A family of ramshackle tragedy.

A comic book *kapow* of boys and blood and beasts.

We were born for relics like these.

In the middle of all the back-and-forth, Henry grinned, Tommy laughed, and both said, “Just like always.” The fourth of us was sleeping, and had slept the whole time I was gone.

As for my two girls, when they came in, they marveled at the bones and said, “Why’d you bring those home, Dad?”

Because he’s an idiot.

I caught Rory thinking it, immediately, but he’d never say it in front of my kids.

As for Claudia Dunbar—the former Claudia Kirkby—she shook her head and took my hand, and she was happy, she was so damn happy I could have broken down again. I’m sure it’s because I was glad.

Glad.

Glad is a stupid-seeming word, but I’m writing and telling you all of this purely and simply because that’s exactly how we are. I’m especially so because I love this kitchen now, and all its great and terrible history. I have to do it here. It’s fitting to do it here. I’m glad to hear my notes get slapped to the page.

In front of me, there’s the old TW.

Beyond it, a scratchy wooden tableland.

There are mismatched salt and pepper shakers, and a company of stubborn toast crumbs. The light from the hall is yellow, the light in here is white. I sit and think and hit here. I punch and punch away. Writing is always difficult, but easier with something to say:

Let me tell you about our brother.

The fourth Dunbar boy named Clay.

Everything happened to him.

We were all of us changed through him.

part one
cities

portrait of a killer as a middle-aged man

If before the beginning (in the writing, at least) was a typewriter, a dog, and a snake, the beginning itself—eleven years previously—was a murderer, a mule, and Clay. Even in beginnings, though, someone needs to go first, and on that day it could only be the Murderer. After all, he was the one who got everything moving forward, and all of us looking back. He did it by arriving. He arrived at six o'clock.

As it was, it was quite appropriate, too, another blistering February evening; the day had cooked the concrete, the sun still high, and aching. It was heat to be held and depended on, or, really, that had hold of *him*. In the history of all murderers everywhere, this was surely the most pathetic:

At five-foot-ten, he was average height.

At seventy-five kilos, a normal weight.

But make no mistake—he was a wasteland in a suit; he was bent-postured, he was broken. He leaned at the air as if waiting for it to finish him off, only it wouldn't, not today, for this, fairly suddenly, didn't feel like a time for murderers to be getting favors.

No, today he could sense it.

He could smell it.

He was immortal.

Which pretty much summed things up.

Trust the Murderer to be unkillable at the one moment he was better off dead.

—

For the longest time, then, ten minutes at least, he stood at the mouth of Archer Street, relieved to have finally made it, terrified to be there. The street didn't seem much to care; its breeze was close but casual, its smoky scent was touchable. Cars were stubbed out rather than parked, and the power lines drooped from the weight of mute, hot and bothered pigeons. Around it, a city climbed and called:

Welcome back, Murderer.

The voice so warm, beside him.

You're in a bit of strife here, I'd say....In fact, a bit of strife doesn't even come close—you're in desperate trouble.

And he knew it.

And soon the heat came nearer.

Archer Street began rising to the task now, almost rubbing its hands together, and the Murderer fairly caught alight. He could feel it escalating, somewhere inside his jacket, and with it came the questions:

Could he walk on and finish the beginning?

Could he really see it through?

For a last moment he took the luxury—the thrill of stillness—then swallowed, massaged his crown of thorny hair, and with grim decision, made his way up to number eighteen.

A man in a burning suit.

—

Of course, he was walking that day at five brothers.

Us Dunbar boys.

From oldest to youngest:

Me, Rory, Henry, Clayton, Thomas.

We would never be the same.

To be fair, though, neither would he—and to give you at least a small taste of what the Murderer was entering into, I should tell you what we were like:

Many considered us tearaways.

Barbarians.

Mostly they were right:

Our mother was dead.

Our father had fled.

We swore like bastards, fought like contenders, and punished each other at pool, at table tennis (always on third- or fourth-hand tables, and often set up on the lumpy grass of the backyard), at Monopoly, darts, football, cards, at everything we could get our hands on.

We had a piano no one played.

Our TV was serving a life sentence.

The couch was in for twenty.

Sometimes when our phone rang, one of us would walk out, jog along the porch and go next door; it was just old Mrs. Chilman—she'd bought a new bottle of tomato sauce and couldn't get the wretched thing open. Then, whoever it was would come back in and let the front door slam, and life went on again.

Yes, for the five of us, life always went on:

It was something we beat into and out of each other, especially when things went completely right, or completely wrong. That was when we'd get out onto Archer Street in evening-afternoon. We'd walk at the city. The towers, the streets. The worried-looking trees. We'd take in the loudmouthed conversations hurled from pubs, houses, and unit blocks, so certain this was our place. We half expected to collect it all up and carry it home, tucked under our arms. It didn't matter that we'd wake up the next day to find it gone again, on the loose, all buildings and bright light.

Oh—and one more thing.

Possibly most important.

In amongst a small roster of dysfunctional pets, we were the only people we knew of, in the end, to be in possession of a mule.

And what a mule he was.

—

The animal in question was named Achilles, and there was a backstory longer than a country mile as to how he ended up in our suburban backyard in one of the racing quarters of the city. On one hand it involved the abandoned stables and practice track behind our house, an outdated council bylaw, and a sad old fat man with bad spelling. On the other it was our dead mother, our fled father, and the youngest, Tommy Dunbar.

At the time, not everyone in the house was even consulted; the mule's arrival was controversial. After at least one heated argument, with Rory—

“Oi, Tommy, what's goin' on 'ere?”

“What?”

“What-a-y' mean *what*, are you shitting me? There's a donkey in the backyard!”

“He's not a donkey, he's a mule.”

“What's the difference?”

“A donkey's a donkey, a mule's a cross between—”

“I don't care if it's a quarter horse crossed with a Shetland bloody pony! What's it doin' under the clothesline?”

“He's eating the grass.”

“I can see that!”)

—we somehow managed to keep him.

Or more to the point, the mule stayed.

As was the case with the majority of Tommy's pets, too, there were a few problems when it came to Achilles. Most notably, the mule had ambitions; with the rear fly screen dead and gone, he was known to walk into the house when the back door was ajar, let alone left fully

open. It happened at least once a week, and at least once a week I blew a gasket. It sounded something like this:

“Je-sus *Christ!*” As a blasphemer I was pretty rampant in those days, well known for splitting the Jesus and emphasizing the Christ. “If I’ve told you bastards once, I’ve told you a *hundred* Goddamn times! *Shut* the back door!”

And so on.

—

Which brings us once more to the Murderer, and how could he have possibly known?

He could have guessed that when he got here, none of us might be home. He could have known he’d have to decide between using his old key and waiting on the front porch—to ask his single question, to make his proposition.

It was human derision he expected, even invited, sure.

But nothing like this.

What a broadside:

The hurtful little house, the onslaught of silence.

And that burglar, that pickpocket, of a mule.

At somewhere near quarter past six, he went footstep for footstep with Archer Street, and the beast of burden blinked.

—

And so it was.

The first pair of eyes the Murderer met inside belonged to Achilles, and Achilles was not to be trifled with. Achilles was in the kitchen, a few steps from the back door, in front of the fridge, with his customary what-the-hell-you-lookin’-at look parked on his long, lopsided face. Flare-nostriled, he was even chewing a bit. Nonchalant. In control. If he was minding the beer he was doing a bloody good job.