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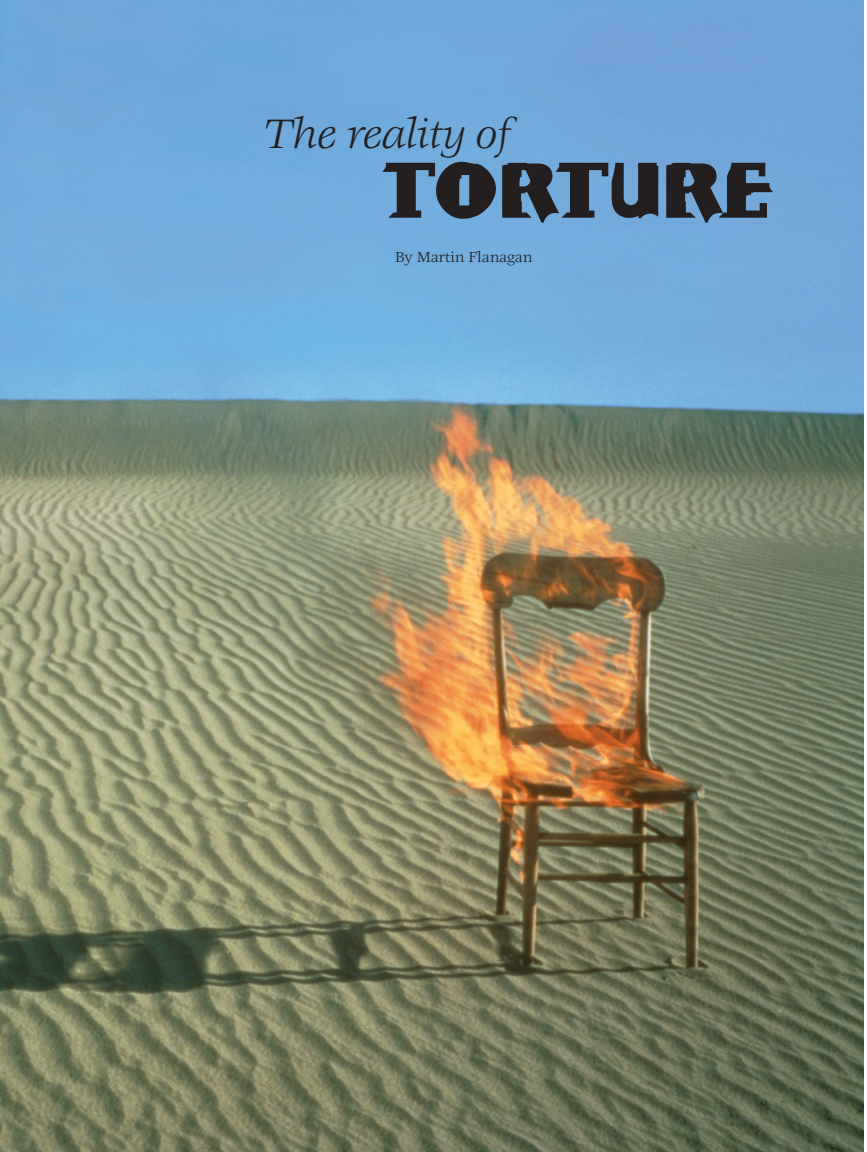
THE GRACE OF
HOLY CROSS

The reality of TORTURE

By Martin Flanagan



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Torture — to me, the most repugnant of all human practices — is coming back into intellectual fashion. I realised this recently when I saw an advertisement for an Oxford University Press book bringing together "an array of social experts to debate the advisability and implications of maintaining the absolute ban on torture."

Next to that ad was one for a book on dance music from the 1940s. Above it was an ad for a history of Latin as a language. And there was the Oxford ad, utilising a tone of high reason and invoking the authority of social experts, for a book admitting the possibility that torture was okay.

That advertisement would not have appeared five years ago. Something's changed. The something is us.

If I state clearly what I mean in this essay at some point I will be called irrational. If I go on about it long enough, I may well be called other things as well. Persistent anti-slavery campaigners in the United States prior to the Civil War were termed "morbid." In a lifetime of going to church, Mark Twain's mother never heard slavery once attacked from the pulpit. Lincoln summarised the absurdity of the legislative position when he said that Northerners didn't talk about slavery in their legislature because it wasn't their business and they didn't talk about it on their visits to the Southern legislature because it wasn't their place.

The so-called super-realists among us will say that torture has ever been among us and ever will be. Perhaps. And there may be nothing I can do about that. But I do have some small say in what passes for civilised discourse. Never in my adult life have I felt my understanding of that term collapse beneath me as it did than when I came across the advertisement for a book on torture.

Like so much in our changed world, the return of torture into intellectual fashion dates back to September 11, from which arose, among much else, the "ticking bomb" argument: A terror suspect has set a bomb which is about to go off. Unless you find out where, innocents will be killed and injured. Is torturing the suspect wrong?

This is a tabloid argument. It reduces the murky swirling morality of places like Abu Ghraib to one enormously simple and attractive proposition. I don't believe torture is that simple. For example, what if the suspect refuses to speak? Is it permissible, as happens in some countries, to torture a member of the suspect's family in front of them? If western democracies abandon what the *Economist* magazine has called their "taboo" on torture, where exactly does the new limit to behaviour lie? And why?

I have a friend, a black South African, who was tortured in Zimbabwe by Robert Mugabe's paranoid regime. I will call my friend Stephen. He is as good a man as I have met, humble and true. He told me that after three months of being tortured he no longer knew what he believed. He told me two men "worked" on him. One apologised and said he was doing it because he had no choice, the other didn't apologise at all. Maybe Stephen was his idea of a ticking bomb. I didn't ask Stephen what had been done to him but briefly, in his eyes, I saw a wild liquid fear that reflected the horrible injury done to him in every way.

Before meeting Stephen I had gone to Robbin Island where Nelson Mandela was detained. The man who showed us around had been tortured and was scarcely sane. We entered the dormitory where he had been locked up each night and he flung shut the metal door so that it clanged mightily in our ears. Most of us were looking the other way and jumped. "That is how they shut it," he cried. Painted in ghostly writing on the brick wall at the other end of the dormitory were the words *Happy Days Are Here Again*.

Our guide gave us a full account of his torture. His limbs had been bound to his body with chains, then he had been lifted to a height of five feet and dropped on to a cement floor. Lifted and dropped, lifted and dropped. His hands had been tied behind his back. An Alsatian had savaged his genitals. Having told us this and more, he marched off, throwing his hands about and talking loudly. He broke into tears when saying goodbye.

It was after telling us of his torture that we swept past Mandela's cell. Of a size a prize animal might be kept in at a rural show, it was completely open to view. No privacy. It was from this bare place, surrounded by damaged people like our guide, that Mandela not only converted the other prisoners of his belief in human dignity but also some of his guards.

Stephen took me to his home. He had two small boys, about six and three, who had just been caught up in the excitement of the cricket World Cup. We played backyard cricket. Stephen came out and played too. So there we were in the late golden glow of an African day, a smell of dust in the air. As an Australian male born after the Second World War, what greater image of boyhood innocence could I possess than a game of backyard cricket? But the man with whom I was playing this innocent game had been tortured. This wasn't an issue of race. His torturers, like him, were black. The moral relativities of the 20th century couldn't find a way around this one. That day I knew I could no longer deny the existence of evil.

I don't claim to be a wholly rational man but, then, who is? Anyone who says they can be detached about a subject like torture is fatally disconnected from what the great poet of the First World War trenches, Wilfred Owen, called "the eternal reciprocity of tears." Wilfred Owen considered such people cursed.

The arguments for torture, like so many of the arguments for war, are always presented as the work of super-realists — the sort who come to the fore in times of crisis when all illusions of human existence are swept away — but you would have to be naïve or worse to believe torture can be conducted, as is now being argued, under controlled circumstances. As I understand it, the Inquisition was also conducted under controlled circumstances; the inquisitors were not allowed to draw blood, just break bones and pull limbs from sockets.

Torture is evil. Sanction the practice and it will assume the character of an institution with those who do it best rising to positions of command.

I choose to be guided by Stephen, and people like him.

The war against terror began as a moral crusade, a war against evil.

Something's changed.

The something is us. □

Martin Flanagan is the author of many books, among them the extraordinary The Game in Time of War. *His most recent book is* The Line, *about the infamous Burma Railway and his father's imprisonment by the Japanese in the Second World War. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, where his essays grace* The Age *newspaper.*