

A good boy turned bad

By Andrew Bolt

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SAMIR Ograzden must have had in him something good that should have been saved. Or at least not ground into the dirt.

His girlfriend reckons she saw it. She dropped to her knees in the dark carpark where he bled to death last Tuesday and cried: "He was the most wonderful person. He'd do anything for anyone."

True enough, I thought then, if by "anything" you mean belting them, robbing them, selling them drugs and trying to shoot them. That, after all, is why the drug addict and dealer was lying dead under the West Gate Freeway.

He'd just shot and wounded a policeman who had come to back up his police colleagues after they pulled over Ograzden's car, in which he had several thousand dollars, drugs and a shotgun, and was in turn mortally wounded in a shoot-out.

This "wonderful person" was just 25 when he died, but already had twice served jail and was wanted on more charges. So forgive my indifference to the tears of another dolly only too drunk on the scent of a violent man.

But then Ograzden's mum rang me.

"I'm a mother whose son went bad," Bobby Cobani said, after she stopped sobbing. "I know my son did the wrong thing. But I want people to know he wasn't just always bad.

"I'm devastated. I've always known him as someone who'd do anything for anyone, as responsible and kind. I loved him to bits."

But of course she would. As the detective now investigating this case said: "Every mother thinks her son is wonderful." Well, most of them.

And yet . . . And yet . . . On Cobani went.

Don't mistake her: She wasn't asking for pity, and even apologised to the young probationary constable, on his first night shift, whose shots she believed killed her only child. "I feel so sorry for that rookie, and for the young man (Snr-Constable David McHenry) who was shot in the leg . . . For that rookie to have this happen on his first night is an horrific thing to deal with." All she really wanted was that her son leave this earth remembered by people like you, dear reader, for better than his worst.

I owe her nothing, and even less to her son. It's nothing to me that you learn that that peddler of ice and heroin, this gun-waving wiseguy, was liked even by some members of his mother's church. And so what if, as Cobani claims, "my son at 17, 18, was the most wonderful person and everyone loved him"?

Aren't the many nicer people, who die anonymously after leading lives as virtuous as they are obscure, far more deserving of this newspaper space I'm giving to Cobani's little thug?

Still, I listened as the dead man's mother, a trained nurse and cook, told how she'd tried to teach her young boy about honour, goodness and sacrifice, bringing him to the funeral of war hero "Weary" Dunlop and to the Anzac Day marches, where he'd talk respectfully to old soldiers.

And I politely mumbled approval as she recounted how she'd brought him to church and to concerts at the Arts Centre, and was so proud when he started reading National Geographic and the paper in just grade 3.

So if he was such an angel, why did he end up selling drugs and trying to shoot police, I interrupted. "I'm trying to reconcile what my son was and what he became," Cobani said sadly. And then I got that familiar story -- one that still doesn't explain why I'm writing this.

He got into drugs, and you can guess the rest. A terrible last year at his school. Addiction, no steady job, and two stints in jail. The last of those was for a year, which means serious.

Cobani swears that even through all that she could see the good boy he'd been and, she felt, would be again. Sure, the first time in jail had left him unmoved - "He said it was wrong; it was too easy; he thought it didn't teach anyone anything" - but the second got him thinking. "He was writing letters to everyone, apologising for having done wrong."

Who knows if he meant a word of it. Out of jail again, it was back to the drugs and the easy money, and the honey words for a teary mum who admits she spoiled him a little. I'd figured that bit already from Cobani's protests that her son was at heart decent because the both times he'd robbed her he'd paid her back: "He stole my ring, but bought me a new one." Heart of gold.

"He always felt he was letting me down," Cobani insisted.

But by now you'll have noticed the great, looming absence in this story. The absence which is why I'm writing about the sweet side of a bad man.

Where was his dad, I asked. As if I hadn't already guessed.

Cobani won't tell me much about her own son's father and how he makes his own money, or even where he lives. That subject worries her, shall we say, and some things I'm safer not saying, especially when I haven't heard the man's own side of the story.

But here is what I can say. Samir grew up knowing his father only through rare visits.

It's remarkable - and a tragedy - that children often treasure most the love of parents who give them least, and Cobani says for years her son would write Father's Day cards that they just saved up in a drawer: "He'd be crying every Father's Day."

There were also the promises of visits that never happened - "Sam would be waiting at the front for him" - and when his dad did manage to take him out it seemed to Cobani it was as much to show him a fancy restaurant as it was to criticise him for not being worthy of it.

Children tend to draw exactly the wrong conclusions from that particular kind of cruelty, of course.

"He idolised his father, put him on a pedestal," says Cobani. But "if he was with his dad for a couple of days, he'd be messed for a month". And mum would try to convince her son he was worth something: "They say don't overdo the self-esteem thing, but I had to make him think he was worth something, that he was important."

Her own father helped there, and was close to his grandson, teaching him about his Albanian roots. But he died when Samir was just 13 - a terribly vulnerable age for boys.

Sure enough, Samir was soon in strife at school with his new tough-guy act, telling his mother: "I had to prove I was a man."

Let me say it again. I have only Cobani's word for all that, although a school friend of her son's did confirm Samir had been a "nice guy" and "well respected in school", but "obviously got into the wrong crew of friends".

Nor is Cobani just looking to blame everyone but herself. She doesn't hide the fact she dropped her bundle when her son was a teenager: "I got stressed. I was losing control myself." She was also sick, but won't explain more.

But doesn't this narrative ring terribly, terribly familiar?

For sure, most children from broken homes turn out well. And I know of men and women who had the character to build good lives and raise loving families, despite having been hurt badly by their own parents.

Yet we have a mother today grieving for the loving boy she remembers, devastated that the kindness she saw in him should have come to this squalid end, in a pool of blood, with a policeman's bullet in his back. We have a mother now pleading for us to see in her son the promise that was never unlocked, the man he never became.

I'm looking, and here's what I fancy I see: a loving child betrayed. I see that boy waiting, waiting by the front gate for the father who never comes. And that's why I write today in honour of Samir Ograzden or, more accurately, for the boy he once was. And for the too many boys much like him.

Fact is, it breaks my heart to see what so many people do so unthinkingly to their own children.

It breaks my heart to see children belted down, not lifted up. It breaks my heart to see, for instance, boys I know being left wistful-sad and bewildered, because dad has left home and can't be bothered dropping by any more, even for a birthday.

Such things don't just break my own heart, of course. Worse is that they can and do break the hearts of children. And who knows in what dark corner they might then go searching for the admiration they were denied?

How I wish all parents knew as profoundly as do most of us - that in their hands they have the most miraculous and tender gift.

Be careful with it, and kind, for God's sake. It can bruise so very badly.