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The Early Years

Jim's father, Tom Penman, was a product of his British upbringing. Tom's father had been a senior manager for an electricity company and his great-grandfather David Penman, Jim's great-great-grandfather, was a sea captain who went down in a storm in the Bay of Biscay. He had become a family legend and Jim's personal hero, as someone who had risen from poverty to success. Jim's mother, Margaret Moxham, was one of six children growing up in Scone, a small country town roughly 250 kilometres north of Sydney. Margaret's father was a shire clerk. Both of Jim's parents came from upper-middle-class, educated families.

Jim's mother was a maverick for her time. She was denied enlistment for World War II since primary teaching was a reserved occupation. But as soon as the war ended she used her savings to buy a ticket on the first civilian ship allowed into the UK after the war. Once on English soil she hitchhiked from place to place, having the time of her life. This was in the late 1940s, when women just didn't do that kind of thing.

At a youth hostel in Wales Margaret met an Englishman, Tom Penman. They courted in Wales before deciding to holiday on the continent together, where they argued the whole time. 'And then they

just thought, "We might as well get married". It wasn't romantic in any normal sense,' Jim said. 'Mum chose Dad because he didn't bore her, and she thought she wouldn't find anyone better.'

They settled in Halesowen, Worcestershire, and soon had their first child, Lynne, after which Margaret became severely depressed but received no support. 'What we see now as post-natal depression, the doctors saw then as a madwoman,' Jim's sister Gill said. The doctors simply gave Margaret Valium, which gave her bad side effects, so they gave her other tablets to help. Unfortunately those tablets also had side effects.

'She was on about twenty-five tablets a day for thirty-three years,' Gill said.

> **Every time she got pregnant she would stop having the tablets, cold turkey, because even she was aware — with the knowledge at that time — that they could affect the child. I don't know if that had any influence on our very early gestation, who can tell …**

Despite the fact that, according to Gill, 'Dad was extremely unsupportive when Mum was pregnant', Margaret and Tom went on to have three more children: David (Jim), on 8 May 1952, and two years later another son, Chris. Gill was born five years after Chris. (Lynne and Chris declined to be interviewed for this book.)

In 1955, when Jim was three, Tom became a Ten Pound Pom and the family moved to Australia so Tom could lecture in engineering at Adelaide University. The family moved into a basic commission house in Adelaide.

Margaret was unhappy as a homemaker. 'If she was born later she'd have been a doctor or some sort of highly successful person, but for a

woman in the 1950s that wasn't on,' Jim said. 'My mother was loving, but temperamental. She'd lose her temper and we learned to be wary of her moods.' Margaret was anxious and worried a lot, but she was also an intelligent, strong-willed and capable woman. She taught Jim to read before he went to school, and he fondly remembers that she wrote a children's book for him called 'David and the Dinosaurs'.

After a few years the Penmans could afford to buy a red-brick house in Glen Osmond, Adelaide. When Jim was seven his mother gave birth to Gill, and again Margaret suffered severe post-natal depression. There would be a knock on the door in the early hours of the morning, and Tom would answer to find a police officer and his wife on the doorstep.

'Dr Penman, we found your wife wandering the streets,' the police officer would explain.

Tom would reply, 'She's a grown woman, she can do exactly what she wants', showing no concern that her unhappiness drove her out of the house and onto the streets in the middle of the night.

'They should have been married for six months, because that is how long they got on for,' Gill reflected. Jim's view of his father was that he was

> **totally traditional in the sense that he didn't like to talk about feelings and thus couldn't relate to Mum that well, but he was totally dedicated to his family … I can remember him working night and day and living in what today people would consider poverty, so we would have the best start in life. And he clearly loved Mum, even if he couldn't give her what she needed.**

Despite Margaret's unhappiness, and despite the drugs clouding her thinking, she was still an amazing mother. 'I loved my mother very

much,' Jim said. Gill shared that Margaret 'had the skill to know when a child was ready for a certain book, or to play at maths, or to draw. She was always there for us'.

All the Penman children helped out with chores. Jim remembers doing the dishes, putting mallee roots in the firebox and cleaning out the ash from the fireplace. As a young boy Jim's dream job evolved from train driver to doctor to vet (he found animals easier to get along with than people).

Jim got on well with his brother Chris, and the two of them fought and played together all the time. 'We were a strong pair,' Jim said. 'Chris was my closest friend, and the best man at my first wedding.'

He didn't get on so well with Lynne as a child, though of all the siblings they are closest to each other today. Gill remembers Lynne once saying to her that '"up to the age of about seven he was nice, then all of a sudden he turned into a sour little boy." Now,' Gill added, 'whether that was when his Asperger's kicked in, or me coming along totally unexpectedly was the thing, I'm not sure.'

Gill remembers getting along very well with Jim when she was little.

> **I thought he was just wonderful … but he gets on with children because they don't have their own opinions. As soon as somebody says something that is opposing to what he thinks, he reacts strongly.**

A few moments later Gill, memories perhaps clouded by more recent interactions with Jim, added, 'He's always been an arrogant arsehole, but he takes after Dad'. For his part, Jim said that Gill 'was a cute little girl, I was very fond of her'.

The boys were sent to Prince Alfred College in Adelaide, a school that was founded by the Methodist Church in 1869 and still exists

today. Jim recalls that the school was okay, but he has no warm feeling for it: 'I was a solitary kid who got picked on. School was just something to go through.' He wasn't social and didn't bond well with his classmates, instead burying his head in books.

The gardening begins

At eight Jim joined Cub Scouts, though he was not particularly good at it. He didn't get many badges and had few friends. But some good did come of it: cubs were encouraged to do odd jobs around the neighbourhood to earn money for the troop. It was called 'bob-a-job' in those days, because you would get paid a bob (one shilling) for a job. The Penmans knew their neighbour over the back fence, Mr Tapley, quite well, and so eight-year-old Jim knocked on his door. Mr Tapley gave Jim the job of raking his gravel driveway. 'He was a gentleman who never raised his voice in all the years I knew him,' Jim said. It became an ongoing arrangement, with Mr Tapley asking Jim to do the weeding and other simple gardening jobs. 'He paid me two shillings a week,' Jim recalled with glee, 'which was good value then. You could buy a large block of Cadbury chocolate with it, though I didn't buy one often. I was a saver!'

Tom saw Jim's effort in Mr Tapley's garden and figured Jim was now old enough to help out in theirs. They had a push mower, and their backyard was the first lawn Jim ever mowed. It wasn't easy: 'Twigs from the trees were forever jamming the blades, and the backyard was terribly sloped,' Jim said.

Jim soon gained his second client, another friendly, gentlemanly neighbour who lived across the road. He was Polish and had been in a prisoner-of-war camp for Polish officers in World War II. 'He was very kind to me,' Jim remembered.

One day Jim went to Mr Tapley's house to work in the garden as usual, but the gravel drive did not need raking and there was no weeding to be done. 'Why don't you carry that pile of rubbish to the incinerator?' Mr Tapley suggested, and so Jim did.

When he was finished Mr Tapley inspected Jim's work and found leaves and twigs dropped along the way. 'If you're not going to do it properly, I might as well do it myself,' Jim remembered Mr Tapley saying in a sad tone. Jim was filled with deep shame, and a strong determination to never let Mr Tapley down again. This was the moment Jim became obsessed with always doing an outstanding job, and to this day he is obsessive about his franchisees delivering excellent customer service. 'I am notoriously emotional in my attitude to customer service — I feel very upset when any one of my customers has been let down.'

The spark of a lifelong passion

When Jim was ten Tom took the family to England for a year, on study leave with his job as a lecturer at Adelaide University. Tom's work was at an atomic research centre in Berkshire, England, but it left plenty of spare time.

'We spent the whole year driving, looking at castles, cathedrals, Roman roads, searching for flints that might be prehistoric knives,' Jim said animatedly. 'It was quite extraordinary, I remember more of that one year than the whole rest of my childhood.' It fueled his love of history.

Jim's maternal grandfather had died of pneumonia back in Australia before Jim was born, and he didn't see his maternal grandmother often because she lived in Sydney. This trip gave Jim and his siblings time to see their paternal grandparents in England, though it wasn't long enough to build any serious bond. 'They were quite indulgent

of us, nothing like what my father experienced as a kid. Dad had an austere upbringing, with few obvious shows of affection,' Jim said.

Jim and his siblings went to school in a twin village called Aston Upthorpe/Aston Tirrold, in Oxfordshire, England. There were only two teachers for the whole primary school: one for years one and two, and another for years three to six. Jim didn't get on well with the other kids, and one day 'a gang of four set on me after school, so I hit one and pushed another over and ran for it,' Jim said. It worked well enough that they didn't try it again.

This village school was the first time Jim was in a co-ed environment, and it was here he had his first crush on a girl. It came to nothing, but Jim still recalls his year in England as 'the most amazing experience. It was quite life-changing'.

The Penmans returned to Adelaide, and the kids to their respective schools. In Jim's first year of high school another boy, Nobbs, 'used to really have a go at me. He just took a dislike for some reason,' Jim said. Nobbs picked on him often, and it got to a point that Jim wanted to leave the school. But one day, when Nobbs balled a scrap of paper and threw it at Jim, Jim exploded. 'I went for him, attacking him,' Jim recalled. They overturned several desks in their fight, and it was quickly big news around the school. 'Even months later boys used to talk about the Nobbs – Penman fight,' Jim chuckled. After that things got easier and he decided to stay.

A significant gift

In 1966, the year Jim turned fourteen, the family moved to Sydney for a year because Tom took a job with Austin Anderson, a consulting firm. The boys went to Sydney Church of England Grammar School,

'Shore' for short, an Anglican all-boys school. In a physical education class they measured their pulse rates and Jim realised he was one of the least fit kids, so he started jogging regularly. 'This was in the 1960s, well before jogging became popular,' Jim said. Today, he still runs almost daily.

As a teenager Jim had begun to hate birthdays and receiving presents, and he still hates them today:

> **It's probably got something to do with the fact that, having no social skills whatsoever, if you're given a present you don't really want, you're supposed to make a pleasant comment … but I can't do that. I can't appreciate something I really don't want, I'm unable to pretend.**

But, in a contradiction characteristic of Jim, one particular gift changed the course of his life.

Jim made one friend in Sydney, Harold Richards, whose family had a beautiful house on Sydney Harbour. When saying goodbye at the end of the year, Harold gave Jim a present. It was *The Peloponnesian Wars*, an account by Thucydides (460 – 400 BC) of the great struggle between Athens and Sparta, in which Thucydides himself had actually fought. Thucydides took great care with his sources and was keen to understand motivations and root causes, so, although he was Athenian, his account is unusually balanced and he was often critical of his own city.

Thucydides has been called 'the father of scientific history', and this book had a huge impact on Jim. Athens at that time was, in Jim's opinion, perhaps 'the most brilliant city of all time', and he struggled with the question of why Athens declined so quickly, losing its creative brilliance and falling subject to Macedon in just a few decades.

Reading this book triggered an ongoing obsession with the fall of Rome. Not only was it fascinating in its own right, Jim also saw obvious parallels with our own time. 'Even in the 1960s, there was an obvious decline in traditional standards and in religion, just as in the late Roman Republic,' Jim said. He wondered: Was our own civilisation heading the same way as Athens and Rome? And if so, could anything be done about it?

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

In early 1967 the Penmans moved from Sydney to Melbourne, where Tom had been appointed Chief Engineer at Carlton United Breweries. It was Jim's first time in the city that would become his home. Tom and Margaret could now afford to buy a posh house in North Balwyn.

The boys were sent to Melbourne Grammar, with Jim joining Miller House, and the girls were sent to Presbyterian Ladies' College. Andrew Michelmore attended Melbourne Grammar from Grade 7 and recalls Jim joining his class in 1967.

'David [Jim] was pretty quiet, but he had a strong character,' Andrew recalled.

> **I remember there were a couple of arguments, discussions on things, and he didn't back off. I can picture David in an argument about something and reacting very strongly and very quickly. He was this quiet, unassuming guy who went about his own business, and then it was like someone would light a match and wha! That's when you saw the strength of his character.**

This quick temper is something staff, franchisors and franchisees were to experience on many occasions.

'Jim was very studious,' Andrew Michelmore added. 'He had a strong underlying character; he is easily underestimated.'

Jolyon Shelton, who was also in Jim's class, remembered that 'David Penman was very smart,' but added that 'he didn't strike me as the really brilliant type, nor a successful businessman. He was quiet and reserved and kept his own company'.

Stewart Niemann, another of Jim's classmates, remembered that Jim 'came across as one of those English types, a bit cultured'. Stewart added that Jim often had 'his nose in books, which was reasonably unusual, to read outside of the curriculum'.

Though Melbourne Grammar was an Anglican school, Jim's questioning mind led him to the conclusion that God didn't exist. 'I was pretty militant, actually. At school I would pin people down and ask whether they believed in God, and argue with them,' Jim said. He and a friend went to a Billy Graham crusade to make fun of the people there. 'So I was kind of anti, you could say,' Jim chuckled. But at the same time he was drawn to Christianity … Whenever someone came to the Penmans' front door, no matter what religion they represented, Tom and Margaret would invite them in; it was the family's way. Said Jim,

> **There was something that attracted me [to religion], but I fought against it. Emotionally, it all made pretty good sense. In a way I was saying 'I don't think there is a God. Convince me'.**

But he was to remain a militant agnostic for many years to come.

Tom worked at Carlton United Breweries for the next two years, at which point he lost the job due to his inability to get on with (in his words, according to Jim) 'eighteenth-century management'. 'He wasn't tactful enough, just like me,' Jim explained.

Tom went on to launch a successful consulting business, solving murders and investigating fires. One case Jim vividly remembers is that of a young man who crashed his car, killing his fiancée. The police found that he had been drinking heavily and speeding, and the young man was facing several years in prison. The defence lawyer called on Tom to see if there was anything to be done.

Tom assessed the skid marks and showed they were consistent with someone travelling the speed limit. He asked the paramedic, 'Did you swab his skin with alcohol before taking the blood sample?' They responded they had. 'That accounts for the alcohol,' Tom replied. He also pointed out that the man had been having dinner with his future father-in-law who was a Methodist minister, so it was extremely unlikely he had been drinking at all. 'This young man,' Jim said,

> **whose life would have been … I mean, it's bad enough your fiancée gets killed, he would have been destroyed by being sent to jail for culpable driving … And he gets out, because of my father. Dad was a really brilliant man. Very tactless, with limited social skills and not a great husband. But very driven and smart.**

Years later Andrew Michelmore, Jim's former classmate, was working at Conzinc Riotinto Australia, which during a particular case used an expert witness in chemical engineering, 'and it was Tom Penman, David's father!' Andrew recalled. Andrew expected Jim to go on and have a career similar to his father's, 'being an expert in something and providing considered advice,' Andrew said.

Tom Penman was always full of ideas and he encouraged thinking, learning and researching in his children. When the family watched a historical film on television Tom would grab the encyclopaedia and

read out what really happened during the commercials. 'As a kid you don't appreciate that,' Jim said.

Despite the respect Jim has today for his father, as a teenager it was a tough relationship.

> **He was a very conscientious and concerned father, but not exactly a softy. I would never have dreamed of disobeying him! There was a time when I stopped speaking to him entirely. At the dinner table he told me to shut up, probably because I was having a go at him. So, I did, for six months. It was really horrible when I think about it, because my father sacrificed so much for us, and yet he was a pretty fierce character and I fought with him. Later I did thank him for all he had done, but after he died I wished I had apologised to him for being such an ass as a teenager.**

Jim's teenage rebellion took a distinct form, however. Rather than indulging in more typical behaviours, he reacted to his father's moderate wine drinking by avoiding all alcohol, something he has maintained (with the exception of a few months at university) until today.

The teenage years

Jim's teenage years were not happy; he was unpopular. 'I was really cantankerous,' he admitted. He disliked being physically close to others, and he didn't know the names of most in his class, a result of the combination of a lack of interest and a struggle to remember names and faces that plagues him to this day. He did have a few friends in high school, 'to some extent. Very few. I had three friends I used to play bridge with in my last couple of years of school'. He was keen on girls but 'hopeless' at interacting with them. He was awkward and clueless, and being at an all-boys school didn't help. 'My greatest wish

was to know what girls were thinking. I just had no idea,' he said. He would have crushes for months and even years, without ever asking them out. 'They probably didn't even know … ' Jim added.

There were two positive influences in these years. The first was reading, often a book a day. 'It was before the age of computers; we didn't even have a television until my late teens. I was a fanatical reader,' Jim said. Jim read books about history, particularly ancient history, and was also interested in biology.

Then there were the great writers such as Tolstoy, Hemingway, Murasaki Shikibu (author of *The Tale of Genji*, an eleventh-century Japanese classic) and others.

The books Jim read sparked him to ask some unusual questions for a teen, such as,

> **Why does a civilisation collapse? Why did ancient Athens and the Roman Empire decay? Why do humans react to wealth differently to how animals react? When you put animals in an environment with masses of food, their populations explode. Humans are the only species where, when in an abundant environment, our populations, overall, shrink. So I just used to read masses and masses of books. A lot of science fiction too, of course; it wasn't all instructive.**

The second positive in his teenage years was his relationship with his mother. He would come home from school and talk to her in the kitchen, pacing up and down or sitting at the kitchen bench. 'She was the person I was closest to in those times,' Jim said.

Jim was very idealistic and ferociously egalitarian in his thinking. He dreamed of a truly egalitarian society where university professors would take out the rubbish and cleaners take their turns at management. 'I dislike inequality,' Jim said.

In one interview Jim claimed he had no financial ambition when he was younger, certainly no notion of ever going into business. 'I never thought of becoming wealthy,' Jim said. But he did expect to be successful. He remembers listening to successful people on speech day and thinking, "That will be me one day". I just didn't expect success to come out of a lawn-mowing business!' Jim exclaimed.

Jim and SUCCESS

For Jim, the key to success is clear:

People think the key to success is knowing things, and that does matter, but the real key is temperament. If someone has the right character they can learn what they need to know. If they don't, no education will help…

My best staff are not those who have the highest degrees or the most experience. They're the ones with the best character. We waste billions on education trying to train up people's knowledge as if knowledge is what counts, and yet we undermine character by not letting kids get jobs, for example, where they would learn character…

One of the key goals of my research is to give people the tools to develop their character and thus level the playing field. Change character, and you can change the world.

Jim believes his own success is largely due to an unreasonable passion for customer service.

When I was mowing lawns I wanted to do a *great* job, I wanted to make it look terrific. I find that in business the people who succeed the best are not those who are most money hungry, but those who are actually dedicated to doing things well. It's not just that they don't want to let the customer down, they want to do a fantastic job for their own pride and self-respect.

As a teenager Jim wanted to be a science fiction writer. When he saw a typewriter on the dining-room table he asked his older sister, Lynne, 'How do I use this thing?' She showed him where to put his fingers, and within half an hour he was touch-typing. His passion for writing drove him to excel in English for his last two years of school, though he said that he didn't apply himself much otherwise. 'I struggled with laziness and would rather read science fiction than study. I got okay marks, but nothing like as good as if I had put my mind to it.' He was, however, in the elite class at Melbourne Grammar — something he didn't tell me, but his classmates did.

More than anything Jim felt a profound sense of alienation at school. He remembers sitting at an event, overlooking the dance floor on a rare date with his second cousin and thinking, 'These people are not my people, and their Gods not my Gods', which is a misquote from the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament.

He really liked his second cousin, 'but after that her mother kept us apart, obviously because we were too closely related, though I didn't realise it at the time. As usual, I was totally clueless,' Jim said.

Jim's second son, Andrew, said,

> **You get a sense of how separate Dad was, even from a relatively young age. He has occasionally expressed to me with what might be sadness, or regret, about his inability to relate to the people around him.**

As a teen, when family friends visited, Jim took their kids to the park, greatly impressing their parents, 'but in reality I simply found children easier to get on with than adults,' Jim said.

Jim was seventeen and in his last year of high school when he watched the moon landing, which should have been exhilarating for a science-fiction-loving teen. But his reaction was different:

> **People were thrilled we had pulled off this amazing feat, and that we would go on and on into space and the galaxy. But I remember thinking, 'This isn't going to last, there's something really wrong'. I didn't exactly know what, it was a vague feeling in those days … Something about the decline of Rome and the parallels I saw from my reading.**