



aha!
moment

John van de Ruit

Digging Deep

When his father died, the author learnt that vulnerability can inspire creativity.

→ **PEOPLE OFTEN ASSUME** there was some master plan behind *Spud's* success. But that wasn't the case: It began as a doodle on hotel stationery. I wrote it in my twenties – at that time in life when you experience a fullness of self, that confidence that comes from feeling invincible, immortal, ready to conquer the future. *Spud* grew from a place of certainty and strength. All my life, I've been a bit of a show-off, and I realised early on that I could make people laugh. Humour was my saving grace in boarding school, and it was what made the *Spud* series so popular. I loved its success: It's a kick to see something you created take off like that. As I became more and more well known, though,

the line between me and my character blurred. There was security and joy in being "that funny guy, Spud."

But when the reality of life hit me, in my thirties, I lost all confidence in my ability to be funny. At 35, when I was meant to be writing the final instalment in the book series, I lost my father to cancer. The brutality of his passing knocked me for six; I had never felt such true, emotional pain. My father was not only a great friend to me, he was central to my writing career. He was the inspiration for Spud's dad, Mr. Milton, and the first person to read my completed manuscripts. When he died, I thought I'd never be able to write, or be funny, ever again. Raw grief stripped me of my funny-guy façade. I had to face my mortality and vulnerability.

I decided to go away, hoping to remember the skill I had once taken for granted. I rented a dilapidated villa on the banks of Lake Malawi, and embraced my emotions. To my relief, it worked: Once I processed my grief, the voice of Spud returned. From the vulnerability of having to say goodbye to my father, came the inspiration to say goodbye to Spud. I wrote 15,000 words in a few days. Writing from an emotionally open space, I was able to capture the sense of possibility that Spud faces when he leaves school for university.

I don't know what's next for me. But my father's death taught me to respect the process of life and creating. At times, it will involve a paring away of any artifice you have built up. But surprises await within that uncertainty. Vulnerability matures you as a person and renews your creativity. I know I might never reach the heights of *Spud's* success again, but I'm okay with that. It means that I'm on the precipice of the next stage of my life's journey.

–As told to Deidre Donnelly