

Ch 1 – 1983 – Face First

Linh Nguyen was running late. She was usually a well organised person, but on this particular Friday she had miscalculated. Maybe it was the extra food she needed for the family picnic. Maybe she should have written a list instead of trusting her memory. Her two young girls would be at the school pick-up soon enough. And then, as if to make matters worse, the operator at the checkout kept chatting to her friend in the next aisle, while hovering over the cash register keys as if she was about to play a tune.

‘Please hurry. My daughters get really anxious if I’m late. Don’t bother putting it in separate bags, just throw it all in the one basket. It’s almost three-thirty. They’ll be waiting.’

Linh snatched impatiently at the basket and rushed out to the carpark. There had been several upgrades at Birkenhead Shopping Centre over the past few weeks, and she hadn’t noticed the ‘*Warning – No Entry*’ sign across the section where she’d parked her vehicle. Just the same, she spotted the isolated SUV and thought she’d have no problem exiting into Roseby Street, as long as she was able to cross the makeshift barrier without disturbing the workers’ equipment. She hadn’t stopped running since she left the market. She spotted a man leaning on the motor grader near her car, and guessed he must have been one of the workmen finishing up for the day. She hoped she wasn’t going to get into trouble for parking in the wrong spot.

She kept shouting at the man that she was sorry. ‘I didn’t see the sign. Sorry. So sorry!’ Still running. Out-of-breath. Her voice sounded hysterical.

The casually dressed figure had been waiting over an hour for a mystery-man by name of Essie. So far, no show. He dropped his half-smoked cigarette on the ground and turned toward the fast-approaching woman. Just like he’d done in Nam, he panicked. A voice from years ago exploded inside his head. ‘*Grenade in basket!*’ Then another, ‘*Wait! Wait!*’

He grabbed at the holster attached to his right ankle and slid the knife from its pouch. As the screaming woman reached him, he wrenched the basket from her arms and threw it as far away as he could. One hand gripped her nose and mouth. The other lunged and hacked forward in commando fashion. Mrs Linh Nguyen hit the ground face first. She was already

dead. The man checked her for weapons, then souvenired his kill. The contents of the basket remained scattered across the asphalt. Fruit and vegetables. No grenade. Carpark B2 remained deserted. He dragged the slender body over to the Vinnies bin, glided her in and shut the lid. He couldn't wait any longer. Not now. His Centurion would be ready and waiting nearby. He would deal with Essie some other time.

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Ch 10 – 1960 – Who Made the World?

Tommo watched as Sister Jude drew pictures of angels and saints on the blackboard. Bit by bit, the dust from the multi-coloured pieces of chalk settled on her habit like twinkling stars in the Milky Way. Sister Jude was plump and surly, and her reddish cheeks grew even redder when she got mad, which was often. Some of the kids from the senior classes told Tom she was bald and had no tits. Of course, these stories were difficult to prove while her headpiece and habit were in place. Tits or no tits, it didn't really matter because Tommo, as well as all the other second graders, knew that the rules she laid down for a good Catholic existence would determine the path their souls would take in the afterlife. She told her class of seven-year-olds they had a choice. They could follow the rules laid down by the one true Church, and when they died they would ascend straight into heaven. Or they could disobey, in which case they would plummet into hell and burn in everlasting fire.

Once a week, and twice during Lent, Sister Jude used to collect the children's pocket money for the black children in Africa. Tommo didn't think he was doing much harm then by taking up his own collection for Dot. She wasn't exactly African, but she *was* a little bit black. He would pocket half the proceeds as his commission and give the rest to Dot.

Dot worried that collecting all this money might be a sin, and so she bought holy cards with her proceeds and gave them out to her classmates. Tommo purchased lollies with his half of the loot and ate them himself.

None of the class seemed to be unhappy with the arrangement. It was one of those win-win things. The rest of the class got a share of God's-given grace for giving Tommo the money, and then they received an awesome holy card in the process. It had all gone without a hitch

until Sister Jude found out about the scheme. She had suspected something sinister was going on because her own collections had recently become unduly meagre. One of the younger children had told her how easy it was to get a really good holy card for only a modest donation.

‘Thomas. Come here!’

‘Yes Sister.’

‘Are you the one that’s organising collections for Dorothy?’

‘Yes Sister. Do you want to contribute?’

Tom’s little hands were beaten with the cane end of a feather duster. He was then hustled out of the classroom and locked in the hall broom closet for the rest of the day, which amounted to five long hours in searing heat. There among the brooms and the mops he contemplated what kind of sin he had committed. There was a possibility it might have been a mortal sin, because it had been serious enough for Sister Jude to lock him up. Then again, he had not done anything as bad as missing mass on Sunday or eating meat on Fridays, therefore it might only be one of the venial variations.

Time passed slowly in the darkness and the heat. No fans. No air conditioning. To add to that, first thing that morning Tom had consumed a dozen jelly snakes, two sherbets, a bag of liquorice, and a bottle of Pepsi. After a few hours he had a full bladder and a sick tummy. He was also beginning to worry about dying because he felt pretty bad. And what if he died now? He would not be in a state of grace. Perhaps he would never have a chance to get to heaven. Just in case, he thought it would be a good idea to say a perfect act of contrition. He did this before emptying the contents of his stomach into one of the buckets. Not all of the vomit was bang on target, so he had to wash some of it away into the corners with his wee.

Tommo had become the class hero by the time he was let out of the broom closet a few minutes before the final bell. The next day he was the school legend when it became obvious by the smell that the old cleaner had not rinsed out the bucket very well and had used the soiled mop to clean the main corridor.

As a result, Sister Jude devised the ultimate punishment. ‘Thomas, I want you to gather the books from your desk and move across the classroom from the boys’ half to the girls’ half. If you like Dorothy so much, you can sit next to her for the rest of the year. She was an accomplice to your disobedience after all. And God has already seen fit to taint her in the bargain.’

Tom had noticed that Dorothy’s twin desk always had a vacancy. He thought maybe she was too different for a lot of the girls to be friendly with. She was pretty smart. Perhaps too smart, and she showed it a bit too often. And of course, none of the class believed her when she told them she was not a new Australian.

‘I want you to know that I’m not too thrilled to be here on the girls’ side,’ Tom confided. ‘No offence to you of course. But I don’t like the girls that much.’

‘That’s all right Tommo. I don’t like them much either!’ Dot’s broad smile made him smile as well.

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Preparations for the children’s First Communion had commenced.

Who made the world? God made the world.

Who is God? God is the creator of Heaven and Earth and all things, seen and unseen. He is the supreme Lord of all.

How do we know there is a God? We know there is a God by the things he made.

How many Gods are there? There is but one God, who will reward the good and punish the wicked.

There was a knock on the classroom door. The children looked up from their green catechisms to see the short, round shape of Father Kelly shuffle into the room. Tom was amazed to see Sister Jude, the children’s nemesis, blush in the presence of this plump, absent-minded priest.

‘Well children, it’s time for another practice. You must prepare to receive the Eucharist, the true body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins. We want everything to go smoothly on the big day, you know. Now remember about your fast. You are not allowed to have food or drink for three hours before Communion, that is with the exception of water, which you may have at any time. Now, you children in the back, it’s your turn this week to try the unconsecrated host.’

Where are true Christians found? True Christians are to be found only in the true Church. What do you mean by the true Church? The true Church is the Holy Catholic Church.

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Corpus et Sanguis Christi. Hoc est corpus meum. Mr O’Leary recited the holy words. He knew them all. Tom did too. Albert parked the car around the corner from St Mark’s and turned the engine off. ‘Well Edith, our son’s really growing up now. Do you feel nervous Tom?’

‘A bit hungry actually, but I’ll be okay. I’m not going to be a sissy and faint. So don’t worry about that. Just you make sure about mum. If she starts bawling, haul her out.’

‘She’ll be all right. A touch of holy water can do wonders. You run along now to the assembly, and we’ll see you in church.’

‘Do you have a clean handkerchief?’ were Edith’s parting words to her son. She turned to Albert seeking assurance. His strong, deeply lined face showed just a touch of rare emotion.

The couple got out of the car slowly, not forgetting Edith’s carry bag with the camera inside. They walked arm-in-arm towards the front door of the church, nodding at the many familiar faces. Albert was proud to have Edith by his side. Edith was just shy of five feet, rotund, with a perpetually surprised look on her face as a result of her pencilled-in eyebrows. Albert, on the other hand, was tall and thin. He possessed a thick head of mousy-brown hair, and his tiny upper lip was camouflaged by a moustache that looked similar to one of those furry caterpillars, the type that bleed green when they get squashed. Both were dressed in their

finest. Albert wore his New South Wales cricket tie for the occasion. He loved his cricket almost as much as he loved his Catholicism.

Husband and wife dipped their fingers in the holy water font and blessed themselves, then solemnly walked down the central aisle to their designated pew, genuflected, side-shuffled in and knelt down to pray. Frank, Winnie, and Joe sat immediately behind them. A discreet widening of the eyes and a nod of the head by Edith to Winnie showed that the two ladies recognised each other from the after-school pickup.

Although normally frowned upon, Father Kelly had given his permission to allow cameras into the church to be used for the children's entrance only. After that, no pictures were permitted. Albert could see Edith was at the ready. The organ music began, and a few minutes later the angels arrived, girl and boy, two-by-two. The girls looked like Christ's little brides, complete with miniature wedding dresses and veils. The boys were outfitted in navy suits, some with their hair in place for the very first time, neatly slicked down with their father's Brylcreem. With prayer books and rosary beads clutched in their sweaty, little hands, they sought out their respective families.

Albert gave Edith the signal. Her finger tensed, ready to press the camera button. Then it froze. There, second from the front, was their cherished Tom. Next to him was Dorothy, her dark skin contrasted against the snow-white dress. Albert nudged Edith, but she continued to hesitate. The moment passed. Edith kept standing long after she was supposed to sit.

Albert seemed concerned. 'You better sit down Edith. Are you feeling all right? You've gone completely white.'

'Of all the times the camera had to jam. Sorry my love,' she whispered.

Just then Frank leant forward from the row behind. 'Couldn't help but overhear. You can have one of our shots. We've got plenty.'

Ch 11 – 1964 – Anywhere Else on Earth

Winnie wandered through the grounds of Callan Park. Pausing, she looked across to Rodd Island and then beyond to the houses sprinkled like confetti on the opposite shore. She found it difficult to reconcile what many failed to realise, that the beauty before her betrayed the presence of a dendritic network of lunacy. Sense and absurdity were shrouded there, inside and outside the borders of the asylum.

She turned her head in the direction of the screaming. High on the hill above the cricket fields she watched as the inmates played their own kind of game. The man in the middle remained still. The others shed their clothes and threw them over the enclosure's wire fencing. They ran around the motionless man, shrieking at the top of their voices until an attendant turned a high-pressure hose on them. The centre-man then sprang to life and took his opportunity to scale the fence, only to be targeted by the same guard with the hose. Winnie wondered if the aspiring escapee would ever be able to cope with the freedom he sought.

Winnie had just been to visit her daughter-in-law. She performed this ritual at least once a month, sometimes more often. For almost fifteen years she had guarded the secret. At times she viewed it as a penance. At other times she did it as an expression of love for her beautiful grandson. Her own son Frank, on the other hand, could never bring himself to see his wife ever again. Winn understood.

All those years ago there had been little hope Alice would survive past the first day. Miraculously, her body had been splinted, stitched, and stapled into a semblance of physical normality, apart from the limp and facial mutilation. Her mind, however, had been deemed beyond repair.

Winn recounted the story as it had been told to her – how the doctors at first tried insulin-coma therapy, then more shock therapy. At one stage they even contemplated performing a prefrontal lobotomy, but this approach was shelved when the new generation antipsychotic medications started to take effect. Thankfully, Alice's agitation and aggression slowed, then stopped – replaced by limb rigidity and a Parkinsonian tremor. And Peace.

Winnie came to learn that Alice had not shown any inclination to harm herself or anyone else for that matter for quite some time. In fact, the medical staff allowed her to roam the asylum grounds unsupervised, provided her medications continued to be successful. That's when Winnie started visiting her. Alice and Winn would often stroll along the boundary of the cricket fields. From time to time, they even ventured closer to the river. Sometimes they spoke. Sometimes it was a silent pilgrimage.

Today's visit was much like the others. Winnie had watched the ageing Alice stumble along with her walking stick, occasionally stopping to poke into shrubbery and hedges, under seats and benches. Always whispering to Winn she was looking for her baby boy.

Winnie stayed a little longer on this particular day. She sat by herself on one of the park benches lazily watching the cricket. One of her friends had told her that watching cricket was like witnessing the grass grow. But she enjoyed the rhythm and the movement of the players. And her grandson Joe was a cricket tragic. She loved his enthusiasm for the game. Occasionally, she lifted her head to the sky and stretched. She could see the faint crescent of the moon as it appeared through wisps of clouds. And she wondered what this snake-pit of an asylum would look like when viewed from another celestial body. Would the terrain look any different than anywhere else on Earth?

Winnie accepted that better times and worse times would come and go in the approaching years. One day she expected she would receive word of Alice's death. In some ways it would be a blessing. She thought it would come soon enough.

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