

Beyond the Orphanage Years

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Sample Chapter

PREFACE

Born in 1952 in Melbourne to a Polish mother, I was raised in Catholic orphanages until I was ten and a half years old. I had a Polish father and an older sister, and together with my mother they lived as a family. However my childhood was lived separate and cloistered behind the walls of the religious institutions.

Growing up in five saints' homes - they started with Anthony and ended with Vincent de Paul - the saints many times did not look after me. Rarely glimpsing the outside world, I lived within my mind to make sense of what was happening around me and to me. Misguided discipline, unforgiving routine, monastical austerity, opportunistic depravity, unrestrained brutality - my body was abused and my mind confused. Nevertheless, I was fed and sheltered and there were rare moments of kindness, moments which, in themselves, were confusing in a world of unrelenting harshness.

Although I had parents, I never understood their meaning to me. I didn't know what a family was. I rarely saw them and whenever I did, I viewed them in my mind through the frame of my cloistered world; they were simply outside people who, for whatever reason, happened to see me. Then one day I was released from the orphanages and I joined the family.

When I entered the family I was also entering the outside world which exploded beyond incarcerated fellow inmates and the Josephite Nuns and Christian Brothers dressed in the trappings of their religion. Disconnected, damned, disorientated, I tried to fit into the family and into the outside world. That is what this book is about.

INTRODUCTION

Eight peculiar years had passed since I left those Catholic orphanages which had cloaked and shaped my beginning through to the age of ten. In 1970, at eighteen, I stood pensive in the senior master's office at Fitzroy High School in Melbourne and gingerly asked him what I could not ask my parents; self-interest ruling their lives.

'Sir, what should I do after I finish school?'

Mr Morris leaned his portly frame back in his chair, removed his black thick-rimmed glasses and anchored one arm in the corner of his mouth. Several strands of silvery grey hair stretched uselessly across a broad and shiny bald head. He was near the end of forty or more years of teaching. Our two years of spare class times, during which we discussed history entwined with humanity, politics and religion in his office, were also nearing an end. The teacher had unwittingly become a mentor as I struggled about how I was going to deal with my future.

'Go and see the outback before it gets stuffed up.'

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His words left me floundering. I stared at a face exuding sincerity. He meant what he said; he always meant what he said. We had never discussed the outback. I was overwhelmed by the revelation; I didn't know what this man really cared about.

'It's going to be ruined. See it before it is,' he glumly added.

The school bell sounded and I left Mr Morris' office silently, my mind elevated beyond my presence in trying to comprehend his latent passion. I didn't understand his concern, or wisdom. As an orphanage boy I often looked to the sky for answers, but I had come to understand its infinite depth gave me nothing. My teenage years in a house with belated parents continually annoyed about my inconvenient presence as their son, also gave me nothing. I had a childhood but I didn't. I had a family but I didn't. Two diverse worlds of damned confusion had taught me that acceptance, guile and endurance were my survival, and that I mattered only to myself.

Something was confusingly wrong.