

Chapter 3

Solo in the bush

In 1964, sexual abuse is far from my mind. It is the monastic setting that troubles me. My seminary is dominated by the bush. This is not the bush waiting for the settler's axe and green pastures. This is wild, torn and uneven, heaved up from cons past. It offers no solace and stretches out behind and on both sides as far as the eye can see, grey and silent, rough and indifferent, uncompromising and alien. It belongs in another time to another people. Yet I am drawn to it. If I walk straight into it perhaps I will uncover both its mystery and my own in being here. But as in most things I am ambivalent – even about the bush. I feel its otherness, and deep down I fear it. When we were kids my father took us children into a gentler bush. He was cutting wood for the winter fires. 'Don't wander', he warned, 'kids get lost in the bush.' I knew that from my school reader. I had bad dreams of being lost in the bush.

In the front of our seminary buildings, reminiscent of a rich man's mansion, and where we are forbidden to wander, is a green circular lawn edged with a road for vehicles to turn and drive back into the world, and, if I remember rightly, a water fountain in the centre of the lawn. A pointed tower, more Arabic than Christian, sits three floors above the squat block of stone with its Romanesque entry into the courtyard. These are signs of civilisation. The Irish poet, W. B. Yeats, in his *Meditations in time of civil war*, knew these signs: an ancestral house with a water fountain 'where Life overflows without ambitious pains'; but we live at the back, deprived of any such signs.



D. H. Lawrence came to Australia in 1922. He was overwhelmed by the:

terror of the bush. [He] looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of bush. Nothing! Nothing at all.⁸⁰

Like Englishmen before him, and like me, Lawrence sensed something menacing in the Australian bush. It was, he felt, waiting for something, but no one knew what. The bush, he said, was ‘biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching myriad intruding white men’. Lawrence was also fearful of Australians, and on the great questions of life, he thought Australians had nothing to say. He wrote of the great Australian emptiness, with its ‘fascinating indifference’, and its ‘physical indifference to what we call soul or spirit’, with ‘no inside life of any sort: just a long lapse and drift’.

I am a drifter, and unlike the owner of Yeats’ ancestral house, I am filled with ambition and pain, doing God’s will, waiting for something to happen, waiting for a sign, waiting to make up my mind. And yet gathered here in this seminary, named after a sixth-century Irish monk who made his home on the island of Iona, Scotland, we live a life modelled on the monastic lives of the saints and monks of medieval Europe, reading our Latin, praying our liturgy, pondering the thoughts of Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, training to shine like lighthouses in a dark world. We are not nothing. We are not indifferent. We are people of the soul and spirit. What would Lawrence make of us?



We Catholics are a people set apart. In the old dispensation, before the virtual collapse of vocations to the priesthood in Australia, in the decade before the Second Vatican Council, Catholics live in a separate universe. We run along parallel lines to the rest of the community. We have our own tracks, trains, train drivers, stations and station masters. Our trains have a direct route to Heaven and we only pick up Catholics. I am studying to be a train driver. I belong to an institution apart from and superior to the world. We have our own culture, our own set of laws, and our own jurisdictional system. We are an international body and our allegiance is to the pope in Rome. We are a law unto ourselves. When the sexual abuse scandal breaks, this cultural triumphalism will come back to haunt us.



Our lives here are ground out of a stone called routine. We move in centuries' old rhythms according to electronic bells which determine our days. There is an ancient bell-tower, which from memory chimes out the *Angelus* at midday aided by a first year student hauling down on a rope. Our days split into three: study, prayer and recreation. We rise at 6.00 am and enter the chapel sometime before 6.30 am. Meditation occupies our minds until Mass begins at 7.00 am. We have no serious training in meditation, but I am reasonably competent and give it my best shot. For much of my life I have carried on an interior monologue with a personal God who loves me and lives somewhere within me and who, if the seminary had had its way, would disappear into the distant blue.

After Mass we walk quickly back to our rooms, make our beds and generally clean up, gather together our books for classes (no coming back if anything has been forgotten) and are drawn by another bell to gather in pairs outside the refectory for breakfast at 8.00 am. No talking. The *great silence*, which began after late evening prayers the night before, continues until after breakfast.

Classes begin at 9.00 am but there is generally time for a quick walk before they commence, hopefully with company that is pleasurable. That depends on the luck of the draw. One must not deliberately avoid the company of any one student and seek out a smiling face. At 11.00 am we take a fifteen minute break. Classes resume again and finish just before dinner, not to be confused with lunch. Before dinner at 12.45 pm, the main meal of the day, we proceed in pairs into the chapel for an examination of conscience.

Immediately after dinner is one of the best times of the day. We wander down to the *rec* hall built by previous students, collars off, soutanes undone, scungy t-shirts, some of us positively louche-like, and wait for the head prefect to come with the mail from loved ones, which he delivers frisbee-like into the raised welcoming arms of children at a circus. I always read my mail in the jakes (toilet) because they contain pink cuttings from *The Sporting Globe* with the football results from Victoria, which of necessity I keep to myself. Sport, recreation of some sort (hobbies) or Father George Joiner's working parties fill in the early afternoon until we meet again in the chapel for spiritual reading at 3.45 pm. Study follows and then another visit to the chapel before lining up for the evening meal at 6.30pm. A short walk after eating and back to the chapel for either rosary or benediction before private study at 7.30 pm. Finally, after a short evening walk at 9.15, we head back

to the chapel for night prayers when the *great silence* begins again and lights close us and the day out at 10.00 pm.⁸¹ And the next day... And the next... And the...



I suspect the seminary was much more civilised in my time than under the previous rector. Veechy was strange but his predecessor Monsignor Charles Dunne, whom I never met, appears brutal. When Geoff Mulhearn, a serious asthmatic, arrived in 1956, he told Charlie of his illness. Geoff came ‘fortified with an abundance of medication to protect him against the harshness of the climate, the mountain frosts and the unheated study halls’. Charlie told Geoff: ‘If you have one attack of asthma in this place, it will be your last. You will be sent straight home. Do you understand?’ ‘Yes, Monsignor,’ was the reply.^{82a}

Dunne was born in 1897 in Victoria and was educated by the Jesuits at Saint Patrick’s College, East Melbourne. He graduated from the University of Melbourne with Honours in English in 1922 and for much of his teaching life at Springwood taught English and Latin. Doctor Daniel Mannix (1864–1963), Archbishop of Melbourne, ordained Dunne to the priesthood at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne in 1927, despite Dunne having completed his studies for the priesthood in New South Wales at Springwood and Manly. It is not clear why Dunne studied in New South Wales and not Victoria.

Apart from the last two years of his life – he died in 1965 – Dunne appears to have spent the whole of his priestly life teaching at Saint Columba’s, Springwood. From 1928–48, Dunne served as Professor, Dean of Discipline, Bursar and Vice-Rector (1940–48), and in 1948 he became Rector, a position he held till his retirement from the seminary in 1963. He was appointed Monsignor, Privy Chamberlain to His Holiness Pope Pius XII in 1951, and in 1960, His Holiness Pope John XXIII conferred dignity of Domestic Prelate on Monsignor Dunne.

Dunne sexually abused young girls. In his book of his time at Springwood, Chris Geraghty writes in all innocence that ‘Charlie Dunne liked me. He also liked my father, and my little sister, Colleen.’^{82b} Dunne could not be trusted with young girls. Some thirty-five years after Dunne died, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, appointed by the Australian bishops to lead their response to revelations of sexual abuse of clergy and religious brothers,

received a visit from a 'mature woman' who told him that when she was in her early teens she was sexually abused by Dunne. These events occurred in the early 1960s. She also told Robinson that Dunne had sexually abused her younger sister. Robinson has told me that neither woman had approached the police or the *Towards healing* program; nor was he given any details of the nature of the abuse. The women appear to have made no official complaint to the Church and neither sought compensation. It is apparent that the accusations against Dunne were not pursued. I am absolutely confident that the 'mature woman' was telling the truth. There may well be other cases.⁸³



Seminary rules were at the centre of my life under Veechy, but Dunne took them to another level. Every student in the college was given a rule book but that didn't stop Dunne reading large slabs of it aloud to the students every Sunday in the chapel. On one occasion, a scrupulous student asked one of the spiritual directors a question: 'Is breaking a rule a sin, Father?' Father Frank Mecham replied that breaking the rules deliberately and perhaps constantly could amount to a mortal sin and eternal punishment in hell. For the already neurotic this was bad news indeed.

Coughing and nose-blowing in the chapel was outlawed under Veechy, and enforced by one of our lion tamers, Dean of Discipline, Father John Walsh (Walshy). We were frequently warned not to cough during Mass, especially so during the holiest part of the Mass, the Consecration. I was a big cougher, but managed to stifle the noise with a handkerchief over my mouth.

Dunne had a fetish about nose-blowing in public, especially during any of his conferences in the chapel. He would explode in anger, demand the student stand, castigate him in public, and forbid him to ever blow his nose in the chapel again. Seminarian, Domine Geraghty, was left-handed and Dunne noticed him cutting bread with his left hand. He called him in and told him bluntly that left-handed people could not be priests. Geraghty quickly became right-handed. Communion must be distributed in the right hand.

Stuttering and stammering students were made to suffer under Dunne. He insisted that stuttering students had to take their turn in reading to the student body during lunch, despite their terrible humiliation before their peers. It was difficult enough for the best readers to be heard in the refectory. Stuttering becomes worse under pressure. I stuttered myself as a small child

and know how the pressure builds as words choke in the throat. As some students could barely utter a sentence, embarrassed listeners, the majority in their teens, would break out in barely controlled titters. Dunne could have called a halt but he allowed the public ridicule to continue.⁸⁴



Paul Crittenden, academic, philosopher and priest till he resigned in 1983, travelled by train to Springwood from Sydney to complete his secondary schooling in 1951 aged fifteen. Crittenden, a brilliant student, was there under the guidance of Monsignor Charles Dunne for four years, but, unlike Geraghty, is more measured with his views about Charlie:

Whether as Rector or lecturer, he was a strict disciplinarian, given to pronouncing terse judgments in quiet but absolute tones. He had a full head of gingery hair, and a puffy face with small, piercing eyes. He looked for much of the time like a smouldering volcano forever on the point of eruption. As Rector he occasionally struck fear among the ranks; but in many ways his disciplinary performance was an act that was relatively benign and even entertaining.

There is a studied coolness about Crittenden. He aims for balanced estimates by heading in one direction then strategically withdrawing to consider another. For example, his view of Springwood when he first arrived was that it was 'quite strange', a modest enough judgement, but then he equated the regime with a detention centre by claiming it was 'run on the lines of a borstal'. Borstals were detention centres in the United Kingdom run by HM Prison System for serious delinquent young people. A few sentences later, Crittenden concluded that, nevertheless, 'Springwood, whatever the faults of the system and the times, remains in memory as a place of innocence and youth, infused with a spirit of generosity and hope'.⁸⁵

In a recent publication, twenty-three ex-students of Springwood (1961–63) have written of their time at Springwood. Some few of the writers chose not to comment about their lecturers. Of those who spoke about Charles Dunne, only two made comments that might be construed as even slightly positive, namely that he was 'both feared and respected' and that he was a 'gruff old bugger'. Dunne was a cruel 'martinet' who denigrated and humiliated students until they were submissive. An

‘acerbic bully’ with little or no respect for the dignity of others, he seemed to delight in embarrassing and ridiculing students in a most public way. One ex-student wrote he never ‘discerned the least sign of Christ-like compassion nor the *joie de vivre* one might reasonably associate with belief in Christ’s Resurrection’. Dunne oversaw a system that diminished some of the best human qualities that many of the young men brought with them to Springwood. Inevitably this:

produced a mindset in many that this was the way in which power should be exercised. Perhaps their experience helps explain the continuing authoritarian behaviour of many clergy today.⁸⁶

Charles Dunne represented the Cardinal in Sydney and followed the seminary system outlined by the Vatican. He was probably as much a victim of this antiquated seminary system as we students were. Nevertheless I was fortunate to miss his leadership by half a year. Dunne was undoubtedly ‘a bad joke’, but it seems to me now that no two of us experienced our isolation in exactly the same way. Along with our suitcases, we each brought our cultural and class histories, our family traits, our individual temperaments and our life experiences to Springwood. All of these combined to determine how we reacted to our immutable routine.⁸⁷



The seminary system is an all-male caste of clerics and would-be clerics. Women are to be shunned. Mothers in particular, family members and all loved ones are to be shed. Our Manly seminary in Sydney is where we will study Theology. Apart from geography both seminaries are much the same; both seminaries are under the control of Cardinal Norman Gilroy and some of our lecturers have arrived from similar work at Manly.

In his first year at Manly Seminary in 1958, Domine Geraghty asked the dean, Father Paddy Murphy, for permission to go home for his sister’s Confirmation. The answer was a firm *No*. When Geraghty, aged nineteen, queried Murphy, he replied, ‘We think you pay too much attention to your family, that you are too close to them.’ Frank Devoy arrived at Springwood as a nineteen-year-old in 1961. During his seminarian years, four of his brothers were married. When Frank was refused permission to attend the first three, his family wrote to Cardinal Gilroy requesting his intervention. No permission was granted.

The God of my institution is an all-demanding God. Just as Jesus did, we are called to reject our families:

A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you. Who are my mother and my brothers? He asked.⁸⁸

Ah, Jesus. Did you really say that?

So we slip out of our old earthly skins and put on our new clerical skins. Like young snakes we leave the old to rot and dry in the hot Australian sun. We take on a new mother who will love us and care for us, the Blessed Virgin Mary, represented by our male authorities. Once when a student returned to the seminary having attended a family funeral he was called to Charlie Dunne's office. He was accused of being away too long. The young man's explanations were pointless. Quoting the Bible, Charlie admonished him saying, 'Let the dead bury the dead.' Then he added, 'Everyone out there is dead except us. Let them look after all that. You have a higher calling.'⁸⁹

We must learn to live without women, for they are the great temptation. But I will not reject them. When travelling back to boarding school in Bowral and to this seminary, I begin with the morning train in Terang. On leaving the station, I move quickly from one side of the train to the other. Waiting with white handkerchiefs in the vegetable garden next to the railway tracks are the women in the Green family, relatives on my mother's side, led by Auntie Poll. I then race to the other side of the train and my tearful mother stands in the middle of the road waving her handkerchief. Then quickly back to the other side where Mum's sister, Beryl, in her pink dressing gown, is waving good-bye. In Melbourne I stay with Mum's sister, Anne. She watches me from her front gate as I walk to catch the tram in Commercial Road. When I left the seminary, Anne told me that each time I left she went inside and had a 'little cry: I knew you didn't want to go, darling,' she said. I thought I never let on.



Mary, the mother of Jesus, is our model of womanhood, as she is for all Catholics. But for us, isolated here in the bush, contemplating our celibate future, Mary, the virgin, is the perfect fit. Mary, immaculately conceived (i.e. born free from original sin), assumed into Heaven (i.e. no earthly grave, but taken up body and soul into the sky), impregnated by the Holy Spirit miraculously (i.e. no sexual intercourse), gave birth while still remaining a

virgin, will remain ever a virgin. In keeping with our vocation, we are called to love a virgin.

In 1964, I did not query the Church's teaching on Mary. I reject it completely now, but, sadly, I note the recent 2003 edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n.510) has this to say regarding Mary:

Mary remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast, always a virgin.

In our seminary we pray to the Virgin Mary at midday. We are called to love her as she loves us:

My soul magnifies the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour ...

But Mary has taken wings and joined the angels. Mary is a Goddess. The Church has desexed her, dehumanised her and destroyed her as a model. She is no longer believable as a human being. But in 1964, I believed.



Now I prefer other images of the mother of Jesus. The Russian communists put Raphael's painting of *The Sistine Madonna* on display before returning it to Dresden in 1955. They had stolen it during the Second World War. Vasily Grossman saw it and was entranced.

Take note, Church. Vasily destroys your misogyny with his majestic words, but at the same time he celebrates the spirit of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the wife of Joseph. Vasily was a war journalist. He accompanied the Red Army from 1941 through to the end in Berlin four years later. Despite the suffering and insanity all around him, he never lost hope, and he never stopped loving. Vasily Grossman is not a Catholic, not a Christian. He is a Russian Jewish writer, who knows what it means to be human. Vasily's mother was murdered by the Nazis in 1941. On the twentieth anniversary of her death in 1961, Vasily wrote a letter to his Mama:

... And you don't need to worry about my spiritual life: I know how to protect my inner world from things around me ... I cried over your letters because you are in them, with your kindness, your purity, your bitter, bitter life, your fairness, your generosity, your love for me, your care for people, your wonderful mind. I

fear nothing because your love is with me and because my love is with you always.⁹⁰

Vasily knew about mothers and their love for their children. He saw something in Mary that Pius IX, who defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, could never have imagined in his wildest dreams. When Vasily saw Raphael's Madonna, he saw into the soul of Mary.

Vasily had walked into the murder camp, Treblinka, in July 1944 with the Russian army as they advanced towards Germany. He had looked into the face of Raphael's Madonna in the spring of 1955 in Moscow and had seen Mary holding her small child up and out as if offering him to the world. In her face he saw the face of every woman who goes to meet her fate with a child on her breast. In the sad face of her child, Vasily had seen the sign of a cross, a cross the child would one day carry.

In the painting, Mary is a slip of a girl, a teenager in bare feet. Her beauty is the beauty that lives in every woman: 'in the cross-eyed, in hunchbacks with long pale noses, in gold-skinned Asians, in black-skinned Africans with curly hair and full lips.' What Grossman saw that day was the 'visual representation of a mother's soul' and in seeing it he saw 'something inaccessible to human consciousness'. This Madonna is the soul and mirror of all women. What is human in her will live forever. The Hitlers and Stalins of the world may kill this woman, but the human in her will live forever.

Vasily had met this Mary before:

in 1930 in Konotop, at the station. Swarthy from hunger and illness, she walked towards the express train, looked up at me with her wonderful eyes and said with her lips, without any voice, 'Bread' ...

He had met her again in 1937:

There she was holding her son in her arms for the last time, saying goodbye to him, gazing into his face and then going down the deserted staircase of a mute, many-storied building. A black car was waiting ...

Vasily's Mary is of this earth. Vasily's Mary, like Raphael's Mary, belongs to all of us and is one of us:

We live in a troubled time. Wounds have not yet healed, burnt-out buildings still stand black. The mounds have not yet settled over

the shared graves of millions of soldiers, our sons and brothers. Dead, blackened poplars and cherry trees still stand guard over partisan villages that were burned to the ground. Tall dreary grasses and weeds grow over the bodies of people who were burned alive: grandfathers, mothers, young lads and lasses. Over the ditches that contain the bodies of murdered Jewish children and mothers the earth is still shifting, still settling into place. In countless Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian huts widows are still weeping at night. The Madonna has suffered all this together with us – for she is us, and her son is us.⁹¹



Yet I persist. Each night I rule a line through the day. Sacrifice and suffering are central to my understanding of Catholicism. Jesus has died and suffered for our sins. I am called to share in His suffering. To be a priest requires courage and strength. But I am alone. We are all alone.

In our bush monastery we do not share our doubts, misgivings and loneliness with each other or any of our private thoughts with anyone. Courage and strength beyond the call of most humans is required. I have answered the call. I am in a long line of those willing to die for their faith. Each day at dinner the Martyrology is read aloud for our edification. Thank God it's in Latin. Our heroic forbears, men and women, were sliced, cut, hacked, raped, beheaded and some eaten by wild animals. I get the drift but the details go over my head while I slice the stale bread which we fill up on before the main course arrives. We are always hungry.

Sacrifice and suffering are reminders of my journey, a journey through time in this seminary. I learn of Pascal's wager. Pascal was a seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher. He argued that reason could not prove the existence of God. Therefore, one should take a pragmatic view and believe in God because the rewards, if God does exist, are great. On the other hand, to choose not to believe in God, and if in fact God does exist, then the loss is unimaginable and could result in eternal damnation. Pascal is advising all to play safe just in case. I'm no gambler on the existence of God, but I am something of a pragmatist. My gamble seeks an answer to a different question: how do I best serve God? Should I serve him as one of his elite priests or should I serve him in the world as a lay man? On my good days I stand with Saint Paul: 'All I want is to know

Christ and the power of His Resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of His death.⁹² My parents, my loved ones, my own hopes of a family are to be offered up as my small sacrifice. Against the sufferings endured by Christ on the cross, my celibate offering is as nothing. So I persist. And yet ...



On many days I have this recurring image of a small boy. In 1958 I worked on a dairy farm near my home town. Pat and Maureen have a growing family. Bernie is three. He follows me about their home and the farm. Sometimes he walks up the paddock with me to bring in the cows. We walk slowly. I hold his hand, and up the hill I carry him on my shoulders. He talks continuously. I tell him he's as handy as a piece of string. When I give him something to do he says, 'Handy as a piece of string.' Later, when Maureen is having a new baby, Bernie is sent to one of her sisters in Yambuk, a small town near Port Fairy. I have begun collecting money from farmers for Santamaria's Rural Movement. I'm working in the Yambuk area and decide to call in and see Bernie. I round the corner and a team of children are rollicking on the green lawn in front of their house. In the group is a little blonde kid. He sees my brown, low-slung Peugeot 203 coming down the road. Immediately he runs to the car. I stop so that he doesn't run into it. I get out and he runs into my arms throwing his arms around my neck. He holds on tightly. That he loves me there is no doubt. Celibacy is strangling me. Too much is being asked.



On Good Friday, the senior prefects lead us down the long road in front of the seminary to the heritage sandstone gates where the bus brought us in some months earlier. No priests accompany us. This is a rare event when the student body appears to be in left in control. We make for the Grotto with its statue of Mary and head off the road into the bush. The Head Prefect, Brian, a tall, fine young man, reads the prayers and we make our way through this indifferent bush recalling the sufferings of Jesus on his way to Calvary. Previous students have cut the fourteen stations out of the bush. I remember happier Easters.



Second and third-year philosophers study at night in their rooms. First-year inmates study in a classroom. I share a desk with David Adams (not his real name). A prefect sits on guard at the front. David has a rocking knee over which he lacks control. He doesn't rock and roll like Veechy, but his right knee, leaning against the old desk already askew, makes writing difficult. Like riding a bucking horse, the desk and I are in a perpetual pig-root. David and I are reasonably good mates. He has come straight from school, a serious young man with blonde hair. Like me, David is in the choir and enjoys singing. In second year, we teamed together to do a rendition of *Bill Bailey* in a concert performed for staff and students.

Some few years after I left Springwood I called in to Manly to meet some of my old friends. I was invited to have a cup of tea. David arrived to have a drink and I welcomed him warmly. He looked at me and said, 'You're using my cup.' And that was all. He never said another word to me. The seminary did strange things to some people.



I resemble T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock. I am torn in two. The prophet and the lover. The outer and inner man. The spoken and unspoken word. One identity displayed. Another hidden. Like Prufrock I have a question I dare not risk: 'Why am I here?' And another question: 'Why do I stay?' How easy it would be to disturb the universe and float them out on the mountain air. But how should I begin? To simply say, 'I'm leaving?' There is time, but not this time.

Like Prufrock I measure my days. Not with a coffee spoon, but at night I mark each day off with a cross. For what purpose? My vocation, my indecision, pin me to the wall.⁹³



Red gravel roads radiate out from my window on the first floor of our accommodation block and disappear into the thin wilderness of the Australian bush. Nothing is flat, nothing even, everything ragged. This is hotch-potch country, untamed, arrogant, at odds with our seminary symmetry. Rocks and stones balance precariously on edge clinging to trees and undergrowth. We see lizards, who belong in ways we don't, rush for cover when they hear us coming. Escarpments rise above deep gorges and valleys. We are not the first to live here. This is Aboriginal land, ancient land, much

older than Christendom. There is evidence here of the lives of Indigenous people. Eugene Stockton is a young priest on the staff. He goes out in his spare time looking for Aboriginal caves and art. On one occasion I fancy I've made a discovery of early Aboriginal art. I tell Eugene and he appears surprised. He'll check it out and get back to me. 'It was nothing,' he tells me later. Eugene comes from around here and is two years older than me and already has a doctorate. He becomes famous as an archaeologist and will later find artefacts thought to be 40,000 years old – the oldest human occupation in the Blue Mountains. When Eugene leaves for Rome midway in the year to continue his studies, he comes to the *rec* on a Saturday night to say farewell. He tells us that life and the priesthood are really about love. I raise it with Domine Donnelly, our brightest. 'That's what they all say when they drop their guard – or when they are leaving,' he assures me.



What is real? The seminary is a grand stage play featuring participants who dress up and play their roles. At times the make-up comes off and we experience the real. I want to believe Eugene, but my life here is more about obedience than love. On Wednesday evenings our spiritual director, Father Ted Shepherd, addresses us in the chapel. From the time I was a small boy I enjoyed being in church at night – the high roof-line of Saint Thomas's, the timber that curled up and met at its apex and disappeared in the dark, the flickering candle lights on the altar, the colour of the vestments of celebrant and altar boys, the rattle and swing of the thurible, the smell and smoke of incense, the voices from the choir in the loft. The warmth of it all with loved ones.

Ted enters from the side, genuflects and kneels to pray. He then moves to the chair and sits at a small wooden table inside the altar rails. The old hands sit down the back. Pre-philosophers and first-year philosophers up the front. We sit together in our tribes. Ted encourages us to love God. He is a good man. But I am unmoved. These are mere words. I feel no warmth. The seminary God is too abstract. Perhaps I am not the best to judge any of this. I feel so alienated that my thoughts are not to be trusted. What is real in this place is our presence. What is real is the felt fear authorities have of our relationships with each other. Their lack of trust. Love and friendship threaten the very essence of this place. Love demands freedom. Love is lived in the fullness of our lives. It is lived in the present. We are confined within

the rules. If we reach out to others we break the rule. If we do not experience the love of friends in our lives, then we can never understand God's love for us.



One of my friends in first year is Domine Ian Fox. I meet Foxy after breakfast, before our class begins. We walk together, which is forbidden, but we meet coming out of the bush and there is no one else around. When we get closer to the main buildings we will join another group of walkers. Foxy is a member of our impromptu singing group, which meets in the ablution block in the evening before private study. Foxy is a delightful happy young man, fair-headed, stocky and short, who bounces along next to me like a young pup chasing a rubber ball. His dad has a dance band back in Sydney and they play on a Sydney radio on Sunday nights. Foxy has been brought up with a spring in his step and a song in his heart.

'Kev, what sort of a singer are you Kev, I mean, how would you describe your singing voice?'

He pants along beside me, barely able to contain himself.

To Foxy's dismay I take a long time to answer. I'm thinking of the time my Auntie Anne's husband, Albert, took me to a well-known singing teacher in Melbourne to see if I had a voice. I'm doing National Service training at the time and rigged out in slouch hat and khaki. Sitting at his grand piano is a distinguished grey-haired gentleman. On a desk nearby are photographs of some of his past successes. Patricia Kennedy, a famous Australian actress of stage and screen, smiles at me and I know I'm in the wrong place.

'Come soldier,' he demands, 'open your mouth wide and bring it up from down here, right down, not in your throat, but from your diaphragm.' He pats his diaphragm – low down.

'I'm a lyric baritone, Foxy.'

'A what, Kev, a what? A lyric what?'

'A lyric baritone, Foxy.'

'Shit, Kev. A lyric baritone. Impressive Kev, impressive.'

I can see Foxy is flummoxed.

'Well, what do you think I am, Foxy?'

'Well, Kev, I'd say you're a crooner, Kev, a crooner.'

'Like Bing Crosby?'

‘That’s it, Kev, that’s it.’ He’s cruising now, back in rhythm. Is he thinking of his dad?

Foxy’s dad is a crooner.



The bush surrounding us is like an old, old man, wizened and drawn. When I can, I join company with this old man, along one of these red gravel roads, but not looking for ancient signs like Eugene Stockton. I look for different, more recent signs. Clinging to the trees are the abandoned shells of cicadas. On the red ground black ants scurry in frantic busyness. If I walk far enough I can hear farm noises. I hear a man shout away in the distance and a dog barking. There is another world and I am comforted.

SAMPLE
CHAPTER