

The Priests

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For the ones who did not survive.

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THE SURFER

In some obscure official capacity I am alone, inspecting massive civil engineering works. I think it's a dam. There's an opening at the centre to release water over the spillway. It's all Pentagon style. Shiny corridors, heavy doors. Entirely empty but for me. I come into a room with a scale model of the dam. The mood turns to menace. I am even more determined to stay in this dream. It's a control system. I tamper with the spillway feature. A catastrophic flood ensues in the real world. I have to escape the room to avoid blame. I crawl on all fours, barely able to progress against the might of an invisible force. The place is a mess – broken plates, shattered glass and rotting food. It's all my doing but I cannot remember causing any of it. I begin to lose my mind. I'm barking like a dog. My face is misshapen; grossly cleft palate and protruding teeth. I can't hear or see. I am caught by security guards who load me onto a gurney. Strapped down by my legs and arms I am about to be sexually violated. I wake. It's 4:32 am.

On the way to work I am at traffic lights, waiting to cross Elizabeth Street, near St James Railway Station in the Sydney CBD. My thoughts return uncontrollably to the dream. A bus approaches fast to my right and in an instant I decide to step in front of it. I have to move back two full paces before I feel safe. The lights go green and I cross into Market Street. Passing David Jones department store, its big display windows populated with creepy male mannequins, I don't notice the young man on my left.

'I want to die!' These words have been repeating in my head for

the past ten minutes walking to here, from home. It's impossible to stop. Now I've involuntarily said them out loud.

Fuckkkkk!

The young man in the suit gives me a startled look. I cast my eyes down, cross the road and walk off in the wrong direction, just to get away.

How did my life come to this?

I was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in May of 1962, the youngest of three, with an older brother and sister. Our family migrated to Newcastle in 1964. Infants, primary and the first two years of high school passed in pleasantly uneventful fashion in the new dormitory suburb of Beresfield, about twelve kilometres from the Pacific Ocean shores of Newcastle. My only brush with fame or celebrity was a short visit from my mother's elder brother, Tommy McColl, an international soccer star who remains one of the highest goal scorers for the Australian national team, the Socceroos. Handsome Uncle Tommy came and went, leaving intact my view that my parents were the most impressive adults alive.

I was a high performing student with marks close to or top of the highest graded class in every school year. My father, Dan, a fitter and turner by trade, is brilliant with his hands. He builds anything. He fixes everything. He's a smart guy and he married a smart lady, my mother. Marg took Arts Honours after the nest emptied in the 1980s. She still works as a primary schoolteacher in Newcastle.

They are widely loved and two of my closest friends.

In 1974 our family moved back to Scotland to relocate to Glasgow. It was a flawed, romantic idea. We returned to Australia little more than a year later. Scotland was too cold and miserable.

We arrived back around about 11 November 1975, the day of the sacking of Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister by Australian Governor-General Kerr. I heard the news over the radio from the back seat of a big Ford taxi, slowly nosing its way through traffic with Sydney Central Railway Station in sight. I had no idea why the sacking of a democratically elected prime minister by the representative of the British Monarch should cause concern. But some of the voices on radio were pretty worked up: the CIA was probably behind it. Hadn't they got rid of Chilean President Allende just a few years back?

The what? Who?

I had no idea. It was all just words to me, at the time. I gazed out the window, thinking how big and American the local cars had become, in just twelve months.

After a carefree summer at a caravan park on Stockton Beach, right across the mouth of the Hunter River from Newcastle City, we settled in Tingira Heights. It's a village draped over a ridge near the suburb of Belmont, about fifteen kilometres south of Newcastle. We bought the local corner shop and lived in the residence behind. Dan easily found work, eventually in the local coal mines, and was well paid. Marg ran the shop in which I'd serve for a couple of hours each day, after school. I loved it. We resumed a truly blessed life back in Australia.

I only attended school for a few weeks in 1975. I was allowed to drift out of the local public school in Glasgow after some of my classmates attempted to force me to bash another boy. Heading home from school we found him alone on a swing in a park beside local shops. We were Catholic and, as advertised by his school uniform, he was Protestant. That was the entire reason to bash him. I refused, and was instantly unpopular. *Oh well.* There were

only weeks remaining before we were to return to Australia. I went potato picking in fields near the village of Torrance on the northern outskirts of Glasgow. It was hard work and so cold!

At the beginning of 1976 I commenced Year 8 at Belmont High School. It was called second form back then. It was a mass coeducational school with more than a thousand students. The cool culture was based around surfing, rugby league and smoking pot. A hot girlfriend who interfered with none of the above was a very respectable add-on.

I was placed in the top graded academic class, but there was little point to that. The school was a rabble. The headmaster, whose name I forget, was invisible.

Teaching standards were generally awful and discipline lax. Sure, there were the usual figures of authority, including one very odd man, a hunched-over version of what appeared to be the cartoon character Fred Flintstone. He wore a gravely poor suit: pants worn too high, jacket far too long. When on the move, viewed from either side, he had the profile of a crazy-big snail. We actually called him Fred the Head, strictly behind his hunched back of course. Fred loved his cane. The Head's entire authority rested upon the threat of a thrashing.

Then there were those who lacked all authority.

Our English teacher was a study in bewilderment. Students acted as if she simply did not exist, like Doc Daneeka after the crash of McWatt's plane in Joseph Heller's great novel, *Catch-22*. Boys and girls would calmly walk out of class, as they pleased. She'd try to bar the doorway. They'd just number up like a crowd in a shopping mall and gently push past, never acknowledging her presence. Or they'd jump out windows to grass below and calmly smoke cigarettes. I felt sorry for her. But Ms English was completely

out of her depth. Scrawny, with curly-wispy-bad hair and a whiny voice, she always dressed in what appeared to be shower curtains. Hot-body Melinda Jones first made that observation, about this teacher's clothes. Give credit when credit is due, I firmly believe.

By the end of 1977 I was in real trouble at school for the first time. The major symptom was truancy. The principal cause was that I had become a dedicated surfer and was spending school days at the local beach, Blacksmiths.

It is pointless to attempt putting into words the extraordinary sensation of being a carefree teenager, surfing in the company of mates. This is no mere looking back with great fondness. It was a genuinely ineffable experience. Although strongly committed to both, we much preferred good surf to having sex with our girlfriends. The comparison was a topic of earnest conversation; no contest.

I was already falling behind academically but in late 1977 a peculiar incident brought things to a head. With a month of school left in 1977, our metalwork assignment was to make a pointless and unpleasing mug. It involved cutting, folding and soldering tin. Who thinks this stuff up? Anyway, I'd completed mine when controversy erupted. One of my friends, a funny but lazy and sneaky kid, had done no work and solved his problem by stealing another boy's finished item. The deprived boy burst into immediate tears. His family name was Waterman. I kid you not. For reasons I have never understood, the metalwork teacher decided I was the moving force behind this Crime of the Century. I mark it down to a discrimination of a type yet to be identified by sociologists. Give them time.

Then, as in chaos theory – whereby ants crushed under a Testoni shoe on Wall Street cause Greece to exit the Eurozone – the

Waterman Incident gave birth to a chain of weighty consequence. A modest note was drafted by the school. Note in hand, I was sent home on brief repentance for minor wickedness. I quickly talked my way out of the Waterman Matter, in which I was truly innocent. But a bigger lid had been lifted. My parents quickly uncovered the truancy and academic meltdown. They came to the school but were unable to meet with the headmaster, who was confined to his office by senior staff, on the basis that he was 'unwell'. My parents sized the situation up. I was immediately removed from Belmont High School.

Dan and Marg swiftly re-established order and laid down the law. I would be going to a Catholic school, St Pius X at Adamstown, an inner suburb of Newcastle. If I failed to get my marks back on track, I would be sent to the King's School at Parramatta, a boarding school twenty kilometres inland from the Sydney Harbour Bridge. *Fuck!* They wore quasi-military uniforms! It was hours from any surfing beach!

I was apprehensive about moving to SPX. I was from a non-practising Catholic family with no experience of a religious school. It was boys only. I had always been in coeducational schools. There were boys at Belmont High School who had been students at SPX. They told intimidating stories about discipline.

The situation wasn't all bad! I would miss quite a bit of the 1977 school year. I'd mount a charm offensive. My parents would quickly chill and allow me to fit in a spot of surfing, here and there.

To join SPX an interview was required. Accompanied by mum, I was interviewed by the principal, Father Thomas Brennan. He was dressed in a white cassock and a clerical collar. I was to find this was how he most often dressed. Occasionally he'd wear a plain dark

suit with a clerical collar or a black cassock. He seemed to be about forty. Other than fleeting church attendances and a perfunctory First Confession and Holy Communion when I was about eight, I had no experience with priests or other religious people. On first impression, I found Brennan formal and cold. That impression did not change over time.

My mother told Brennan I had been removed from Belmont High School because of truancy and bad academic performance. 'Before this trouble at Belmont, he has always been one of the top few students in the top class at every school he's been at,' she said, accurately.

I needed discipline, my mother stressed. She and my father wanted me at SPX for that reason. I'd been warned that if I did not behave and perform at SPX, I'd be sent to a boarding school in Sydney, she told Brennan.

'Is there anything you should add about your behaviour at Belmont?' These were the first words Brennan directed at me. Until that point he had hardly looked at me. He was intimidating. 'There's nothing more to tell, Father.'

I wasn't accepted straight away. Brennan said he would have to think about it and make inquiries of Belmont High School. About a week later, I was approved.

I commenced at SPX in February 1978 in what is now called Year 10. I was fifteen, turning sixteen in May of that year. Boys were called by their surname at SPX and addressed as Master. I was, accordingly, Master Miller. It was unusual for priests or lay teachers to address junior school boys by their first name, though it did happen.

Meeting with Brennan was at his request, made by announcement over the school intercom at any time of the day, or more usually at

the end of lunch assembly when Brennan would name the few boys required at his office. Sometimes a written message would be sent directly to a classroom, via a junior boy carrying a note. Everyone wanted to stay away from Brennan's office. It only meant trouble, as I was to discover. The first time I was told to report to Brennan's office, I walked in the main school entrance. The administration offices were to the immediate left. The entry to Brennan's office was along a tight corridor and past a small office that housed his secretary. There were chairs against a wall where boys, called to see the principal, sat and pondered their fate.

When I arrived at his office, Brennan was accompanied by Father Patrick Helferty, also dressed in a cassock. They were a contrasting pair. Brennan was superficially refined. Handsome, tallish, athletically slim, he spoke in an affected 'posh' Australian accent. He had a slightly uncertain presence about him, the meaning of which I never understood. Helferty was more substantial: plain-looking, overweight, middle height, with a strong Irish accent, seemingly well educated. There was nothing uncertain about Helferty. To me, at fifteen, he was very intimidating. There was one other obvious difference. Helferty was a robust and manly character. Brennan was obviously effeminate. If not a priest, Brennan looked as if he could have dressed up each morning and sold men's clothes in a respectable department store. Helferty might have donned jeans and driven a truck.

Helferty's nickname was Fat Pat. He was feared by all junior boys. Although Brennan was the principal, Helferty was widely seen as the senior man at SPX. He was a pivotal figure of discipline and good order, and he circulated regularly during lesson breaks. It was obvious the relationship between the two was close and I always viewed it as a strong collegial bond between priests. However,

thirty-seven years after I first met Helferty, I found out that he and Brennan were lifetime lovers. It makes sense, in hindsight. But neither of them ever gave a hint.

I was aware of four priests at SPX, during my three years there. The only three with whom I had direct contact were Brennan, Helferty and Father John Denham. I cannot remember the name of the fourth. I just recall him being around. The priests lived at the school with their private quarters at the northern end of the same building, the southern end of which housed Brennan's office.

Denham was overtly homosexual. He was relatively tall, overweight, plain-looking, with a ruddy complexion as if he drank too much. He was notorious for making sexual advances towards boys, and he was active in this way for the whole time I was a student at SPX. By 2015, Denham had received some small measure of comeuppance, a minimum sentence of twenty years' jail for sexually abusing more than fifty boys. Sexual touching, forced oral sex, repeated anal rape – this depraved character has pleaded guilty to all of these things committed on boys as young as seven and as old as sixteen, depending, presumably, on opportunity and what flavour of perverted sexual desire he happened to be indulging at the time.

More than fifty boys, some as young as seven.

It bears repeating. It also bears mention that some of his victims chose suicide over the damaged existence he left them. If legally permissible, I'd volunteer to put a bullet through his head. I wouldn't push to be first in line, but I'd definitely turn up and do the deed if required.

Maybe God, if he exists, will ultimately square the ledger with Denham. Or Denham may do the honourable thing himself. Each of these scenarios is as improbable as the other. The likelihood of

the existence of God in the required literal sense is incalculably small, whereas Denham almost certainly sees himself as a victim of a culture which refuses to 'understand' him. And the main person, who would protect Denham during the height of his nearly twenty years of untrammelled sexual predation, was the principal of my new school.

I've heard many claims across the years that Helferty and Brennan were unaware of Denham's criminality. If only they'd known, they would have protected the boys from him. It's complete rubbish, composed of bald-faced lies. Helferty and Brennan knew, as did everyone else at SPX, at least to the extent of persisting rumour. Perhaps they shielded Denham to protect the Church, and the repute of SPX but this was not the main reason. If protecting the Church and the school was important, they would have stopped Denham. They did not.

Brennan and Helferty allowed Denham to get away with outrageous sexual abuse for many years. More than that, Brennan was aggressive in protecting Denham. He viciously caned boys who had the courage to complain to him, even though, he knew as he was thrashing them that their complaints were true. Some clever social anthropologist could mount an impressive case for the proposition that the corruption of all common decency at SPX, during the 1970s and 1980s needs to be understood in its full context and was based on multiple factors. It may even make for an interesting read. I'll pass.

Why were these three men, each so different from the other, uniformly criminal and vile? Having met Denham on many occasions, and given what I recently learned about Brennan and Helferty, I'm certain of the most important factor – and this also resolves a mystery that ran in my mind for decades. I believe it was

because Denham protected his position by threatening to reveal Brennan and Helferty as homosexual lovers. I would go further and say that whether he ever actually put the specific threat counts for naught. It would have been enough that Brennan and Helferty believed Denham would do so.

Threatening to out Brennan and Helferty would have been a powerful card in the hands of this wholly amoral and selfish man. As all of the priests lived together in a large shared apartment, at the northern end of the main school building, the closeted relationship between Brennan and Helferty was known to Denham, himself openly homosexual. Denham had the senior leadership of SPX right where he wanted them. For starters, it was dangerously illegal to be an active homosexual in 1978. Homosexual intercourse, sodomy, was a serious criminal offence. And what would have become of their careers in the Church?

If the common human failing of weakness in the face of blackmail was not the reason Brennan and Helferty protected the worst paedophile priest in Australian history and provided him with sexual access to as many bodies of vulnerable young boys as his appetite desired, I can see only one other plausible explanation – Brennan and Helferty were truly evil men, parading in the guise of priests.