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THE CHOIRBOYS

Truth is the child of time; erelong she shall appear to vindicate thee.
Immanuel Kant

One of the things that has helped George Pell and his defenders to bat off or gloss over the allegations of Monument and Dignan is what has been cast in some quarters as the ambiguity of the behaviour. It's the notion that this was simply 'horseplay' or 'a bit of rough and tumble' and that Monument and Dignan, damaged men, had simply misinterpreted what was going on. That is a highly questionable premise, but it remains in public discourse. Public discourse still so often weighted to protecting the accused and doubting the accuser.

Whatever the supposed ambiguity of these alleged actions, they were not actions befitting an archbishop or a cardinal. They are said to have happened when Pell was a relatively young priest. As Father Pell rose through the ranks of the Church, even at its most innocent interpretation, what happened at the Eureka Pool was too risky for a man of his stature to risk question marks over his reputation.

The story of The Kid and The Choirboy has no such ambiguity. For if what was told to Taskforce SANO at Victoria Police in a sworn statement and disclosed to a tiny circle of people is true, what it was alleged Pell did to those two 13-year-old boys at St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne is his biggest slip-up of all. If true, it is a horrible crime. And in its aftermath came heartbreaking

consequences. Moreover, by the time it's said to have happened, Pell was Archbishop of Melbourne. By that time, Pell had set up the Melbourne Response to tackle the problem in his archdiocese of clergy child abuse. If these allegations are true, they point to utter. sinful, hypocrisy.

This is the story of two teenage boys sent on scholarships from what were then Melbourne's inner suburbs to a Catholic boys' school—St Kevin's College. St Kevin's is in Toorak, Melbourne's most exclusive precinct. The school is wedged between the Kooyong Tennis Club and the Yarra River and closed behind grand iron gates with gilded lettering. The boys wear boater hats and navy blazers, candy-striped with emerald and gold. While the area the boys came from has now gentrified, in the 1990s it might as well have been a different planet from Toorak.

I'm not at liberty to name the boys—complainants of sexual assault and their families have a legal right to anonymity and it has been requested here. I've called them The Kid and The Choirboy. The boys got their ticket to St Kevin's because they could sing. The choirmaster from St Patrick's Cathedral had sent scouts to the Catholic primary schools around Melbourne's suburbs to find boys on the cusp of puberty who had the voices of angels. In return for their vocal skills, the boys received choral scholarships to St Kevin's. When The Kid remembers it, he has tears in his eyes. 'It was a dream of my mum and I, that I could go to this incredible private school that we could never afford, she was so proud,' he says. The Choirboy's mum, whom I'll call Mary, had no idea her boy had this talent.

'But it was good, you know?' Mary says, smiling at the memory. 'A nice scholarship for a good education.'

It was to be a big commitment for the families but the boys were very enthusiastic. The working parents carpooled to help with the commute. The Choirboy threw himself into his new role as he did everything in life. 'Oh my god, everything had to be done

yesterday,' Mary laughs. '[He] would disappear from sun up to sun down ... He was just gung-ho, you know?' Weekends were filled with song. The choristers were expected to sing from the first day of term one to Christmas Day. The boy loved it.

In 1997, the last year that The Choirboy and The Kid spent in the choir, the bluestone gothic pile known as The Cathedral Church and Minor Basilica of St Patrick, or simply, St Patrick's Cathedral, was celebrating a centenary since its consecration. Huge celebrations were planned and in its honour, the boys were to perform Handel's *Messiah*. The sounds of 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hal-le-lu-jah!' echoed around the sacristies and the nave. His Grace, Archbishop George Pell was to say the mass.

Other boys, now men, who were in the choir at the time remember Archbishop Pell being a regular presence in their lives. During May 2016, I called as many of the fifty choristers from the time as I could muster. I think I got to about thirty-five. Of those left, the remainder were either adult or much older members, a couple of overseas visitors, a handful who could just not be found and one or two who chose not to answer my calls or messages. Several are now high-profile singers and musicians. The boys would practise four days a week, and two of those sessions would be at St Patrick's Cathedral. Pell would drop in to watch the singing from time to time. Some of the guys also remember him joining the annual camp they attended at Easter to prepare for the holy season's masses. He would say mass for the boys at the camp.

The Choirboy's older sister remembers he was a very amiable boy. 'He always liked company as well, he always had to have someone with him all the time and he was, he was a great kid. [He] was, as a child, just a normal child.'

But at some point between his thirteenth and fourteenth birthdays, The Choirboy's enthusiasm waned considerably. 'Little murmurs, you know? Like, he was tired, you know, of the commitment to getting up early in the morning to practise,' Mary says. The boys would start their rehearsals an hour before school two days a week and also on Sundays before mass. They'd also have evening sessions

at the cathedral once a week. The lead-up to Holy Week at Easter was terribly busy. Mary's son began to grumble about getting up to go. Mary just put it down to his teenage years. Then, one day, he snapped. 'Yeah, just out of the blue, "I don't want to be in the choir any more",' she remembers. 'And we said, "Well you do realise we can't afford the school fees?"' And he said, "Yeah", and I said, "Well, think about it", I said, "We can't do anything till the end of the year and you can't really swap and change".'

Mary was not pleased. She says for her family, the St Kevin's school fees were 'astronomical', and it seemed a shame to miss out on the rest of the school experience just because her son was weary of choir. But the boy was immovable. One of the other choristers volunteered to me that there was a boy who had that year become difficult at school. He couldn't remember the name at first. I listed a random selection of other names from the choir, with The Choirboy's buried in it. 'That's it!' his former classmate remembered. He told me The Choirboy became difficult at school—angry and a bit of a bully.

Certainly, while his photograph from the year before shows a cherubic young boy with a bowl haircut, in 1997 his face has hardened. He is frowning. His friend, The Kid, has a strange look on his face. In that photograph, The Kid doesn't look at all like the handsome young man I met at the RSL. At the end of the year, The Choirboy was to be a chorister no more—he was moved out of St Kevin's to a more affordable local Catholic secondary. 'I just put it down to him being a teenager and deciding he'd had enough—that it was, you know, too tiring,' Mary says.

That very same year, his friend, The Kid, had also made the same firm decision to get out of the choir as soon as he possibly could. His behaviour at school also became a problem. His voice had broken and, no longer a soprano, his choir days were numbered. He too had gone to another Catholic school, and the families rarely saw each other. The boys drifted apart.

Mary's daughter noticed a marked difference in her little brother from that point. 'Looking back, yeah, his whole personality,

well, he changed. He did. He wasn't the same person as what he was beforehand,' she says.

'His life spiralled,' Mary says. 'It really did spiral.' Her daughter nods and presses her lips together.

Mary and her daughter are sitting on a sofa in Mary's living room in her unit in a suburb of Melbourne. They are hospitable and decent women, unpretentious and plainly dressed. They have been searching for answers for what happened to their son and brother for years. Mary lives alone—her daughter is bringing up a young family. Mary works in a shop and tries to make sense of life. But her sparse little unit is a house of grief. While she is stoic and does not make a fuss about the raw deal that the past few years have dealt her, her mouth betrays her. It's permanently slightly drawn down at the corners. She's a woman who has had a full-time job keeping a son together and now he's gone. After it happened, she was left scratching her head, making meals for one and wondering how it all went so wrong. Until The Kid came along.

The year after he left the choir, The Choirboy got into drugs. In a big way. While at age thirteen he had sung Handel's *Messiah*, clad in a choirboy's crimson and white robes, eyes cast up to heaven, by his fourteenth year, he was already dabbling in heroin. 'It's devastating to watch your child spiral like that,' Mary says, shaking her head at the memory of anger, frustration, heartbreak that she dealt with in equal parts. The Choirboy became like one of the disengaged young men that Carolyn Quadrio charts in her research.

His sister watched him completely withdraw. 'I think from my point of view, he changed to a point where you know, he was in his own world,' she says. The teenager changed friendship groups. He stopped talking. 'He just became very distant, very enclosed,' she says. 'It was embarrassing for me because, looking back, I didn't know why or what this stemmed from and how this was ...' She trails off. 'It was embarrassing for me as a sister that I had a brother that was like this.'

For Mary, it was harrowing to watch her son constantly chasing heroin. Every now and then, he'd go to rehab and she'd have to

drive him somewhere to help him score because you wouldn't get in to a program if too much time had lapsed since your last hit. It was mind-boggling for a decent woman who thought she'd brought up two great kids, given them the best education she could. From time to time, her son would report that he had bumped into The Kid somewhere when he was out socialising with his mates. He told his mum that The Kid was 'struggling a bit'. She asked her son was it drugs, too? But no, it wasn't drugs, he answered. He was just 'struggling'. Her son was a young man of few words, and at the time, The Kid's struggles had no meaning for her, and so she didn't inquire any further.

Her son's heroin chase went on for about fifteen years. The Choirboy never had a career, was never able to hold down much of a job. He was a devoted uncle to his small niece and nephew and Mary says he was, despite it all, a loving and good son. He lived with his mum and she was sometimes questioned about why she didn't kick him out. But Mary knew she was all her son had. 'I care about my son, I love my son, that's my son,' she says, speaking in the present tense of a mother who still struggles to come to terms with the fact that her youngest child is now a past-tense concept. 'If I don't care about him, no-one else is going to care about him—simple as that.'

The Choirboy died in 2014. He was thirty. Mary told almost everyone she knew that he died in a car crash. But it wasn't a car accident. It was a heroin overdose. She says she just didn't want the shame and the pity. All that's left of him now is a poorly tended Facebook page with a poorly taken profile picture. He's not smiling.

Mary's daughter kept her mum's secret too. 'I have never told anybody, only one of my closest friends ever knew,' she says. 'I told everybody it was because of a car accident because I don't want to have to explain to people that, you know, my brother lived half his life as a drug addict, and a heavy one at that.'

The funeral was on a Thursday in 2014. The sort of day when, all those years before, Mary would be packing her son off to St Pat's to sing his little heart out in the cathedral. Now she was preparing him to be buried. Although she had informed The Kid, she was still

slightly surprised to see the young man respectfully take his place in a pew. In the following months, Mary would occasionally see The Kid when he came into the shop where she worked. They'd have a small chat. He was a well-brought-up boy, she thought. He'd always give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Months later, Mary was serving customers at work when she received a telephone call from a detective from Victoria Police. Immediately she assumed they were trying to pin something on her son. 'I said, "You do realise [my son] passed away?"' And they said they did and they passed on their condolences. And the detective mentioned something about sexual assault. 'Well, I nearly fell over,' she says. 'And I said, "You can hang a lot of things on my son, but that's not one thing you can hang on my son".'

Of course, the detective wasn't referring to her son as a perpetrator. He wanted to know if her son had told her about anything that he'd borne witness to or experienced during his time at St Patrick's or St Kevin's. Mary was shocked. 'And I've gone, "Oh, I don't know anything about that one, you know, I have no knowledge",' she remembers. The Taskforce SANO detectives then came to take a statement from Mary. She was completely in the dark about what had happened. And in her confusion, a new trauma came flooding back.

'I was floored,' Mary says. 'I've buried a son, I've lost a son due to a drug overdose—which is not a nice way to lose a child. And then I get this into my life.' Scenes from the last fifteen years of her son's life began to flicker through her mind in fast motion. She was wracked with questions and struggled to sleep.

One evening, some time after the detectives took her statement, The Kid happened to come by when Mary was on the late shift. The shop was empty. She decided to have the conversation with him that she suspected would upset her, but she needed to know. 'I just asked him if I could ask him what happened. If, you know, if it wasn't going to upset him. Because I didn't want to upset this person, um, because [my son's] passed away. I didn't want to bring back bad memories for him.' But The Kid understood immediately.

'He said, "No, no, ask me". I asked him if my son was a victim and he said, "Yes".' Her son was a victim, he was saying, of George Pell.

Mary was overcome with a hot rush of anger. Not at The Kid, but at her son, for not telling her. Because Mary had asked her son. Not just once. Something inside of her, some mother's intuition perhaps born in the shock after her boy went so quickly and spectacularly off the rails, had made her suspect that he had been a victim of abuse. 'I asked [him], I can't remember the words I used, whether he was touched up, or played with, and [he] told me "no".' The boy shrugged. She says shrugging was something her son would sometimes do when he didn't want to talk about things. She still had a niggling feeling something was up. 'I never said anything to anybody,' she says. 'And then, again, after a while, I asked him and again he told me "no". And then I get this. And I was just so angry with [him],' she says, closing her eyes at the memory of it, 'for not telling me. So angry. Sometimes I'm still very angry.'

The Kid gently told her what he says happened with the Archbishop. 'He told me that himself and [my son] used to play in the back of the Church in the closed-off rooms,' she says.

'In the cathedral?' I ask her.

'In the cathedral, yep. And um, they got sprung by Archbishop Pell and he locked the door and he made them perform oral sex.' The Kid still remembered the incident so clearly. Being picked up afterwards by his parents. Staring out the car window on the way home. Mary swallows and looks at me in disgust. Her daughter, who has tears in her eyes, keeps her gaze on her mother.

'What went through your mind, as a mother, when you heard that,' I venture quietly.

'Oh angry,' she says, sighing and stiffening her back. 'Angry, as I said, at [my son], for not telling me, but also angry at the Catholic Church. I sent my child there—I sent both of my children there—for an education, to be safe. You send your kids to school to be safe. Not to have this done.'

'It's devastating,' her daughter says, 'because it helps to explain a lot of incidents in his life. And yeah, it's devastating, it is, it's