

STILL
STANDING!

by

JOHN CARTHEW

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This is an autobiography.

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Foreword.

“It shouldn’t be like this! And why aren’t people being held accountable and made to pay for neglect and abuse?”

“John” I said, “your problem is that you long for justice and that justice should be done. The reality is, sadly, is that this does not always happen because we live in a broken world. Society today is grappling with the exposing of the wholesale injustice perpetrated upon the most vulnerable in our communities - the children. Sadly, those who are entrusted with the task of loving, caring, nurturing and protecting our children are too often those who have failed. Worse, many are at best uncaring, and at worst cruel and abusive.

The ongoing consequences of this wilful destruction of innocent lives include an inability to relate to others emotionally and physically, a negative reaction to those in authority, and behaviours that trend toward self destruction. And these in turn affect the next generation.

Thousands upon thousands of children are suffering in this way; the fifty-year-old child, the sixty-year-old child, the seventy-year-old child is still crying in a lonely place.

STILL STANDING! is the story of one of these children.

It is a story of Courage - not the 'rush into the flames to rescue a baby' kind, nor the 'one act that saved the world'. It is the courage of the human spirit that conquers one impossible day after another. It a story of Love - that journey we all share; our need to love and be loved, and to have the understanding and acceptance of those we love. It is a story of hope - the often-fragile thread that keeps our eyes on the possibility of a better tomorrow.

It is a story of Inspiration, as we follow John across the length and breadth of Central and Eastern Australia, building a life and careers in many different fields.

As you read this story you will be inspired by the honesty and optimism.

Dorothy Gilding. Teacher and author

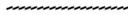
Introduction

I was nine years old.

I had run away from home to escape the horrors of a drunken, abusive father.

I was charged with being neglected and uncontrollable.

I spent the next three years in prison - the Enoggera Church of England Boys' Home in Brisbane.



A typical day begins with a meagre portion of porridge or Weetbix. I scan the other kids' bowls to see if they have left anything. Of course not! They are starving too, and I wish it was my turn to wash the dishes.

Being in the kitchen gives me an opportunity to steal some food. I think of the cold meats and cheese in the fridge for the staff and my mouth waters.

But I am not on the roster today.

I make my bed and dress in the ill-fitting, khaki, 'one-

size-fits-all' uniform and join the others. I look and feel like a prisoner as I march with others, past the Catholic school to a chorus of jibes, taunts and insults from the pupils.

Every day is the same.

We arrive at the school and watch the 'normal' children playing marbles or kicking footballs on the oval. These kids have been warned not to associate with us. In fact they risk punishment if they do. We are all thieves, liars and cheats and not to be trusted. At roll call we stand as outsiders with only each other to cling to. We 'home kids' perform all the menial tasks - picking up rubbish and cigarette butts, emptying bins, washing chalk from the paths and under the school while class is in progress. During recess, we clean the blackboards.

I have little chance to learn anything and this has disadvantaged me and has caused me pain throughout my life. Pamela Evans is a brave little angel. She is my friend despite all. Today she has brought me a sandwich from her home and sneaks it to me at lunchtime. I smell the sweet freshness of real food and I love her for her kindness. She knows the great risk she takes in helping me.

At three o'clock we are marched back to the boys home. I look at the roster. My name is not there today for cleaning the toilet and shower block, or for working in the kitchen or for stoking the coal furnace for hot

showers, so I have some free time.

With some other children, I go to the creek that runs through the bottom of the property. Two of us strip and wade in the water. Holding an old sugar bag by the corners, we scoop it under the overhanging grasses and vegetation by the bank. Success! We have caught two little bream and an eel in our net. We carry these to the furnace that is located at the rear of the shower block and cook them on the live embers we have shovelled from the fire.

After a shower and dinner, I find I am one of the lucky ones on washing up duty. I am not quick enough to grab the scraps the staff had left, but I manage to steal a carrot from the fridge. Perhaps today, for even a few hours, I will not feel gnawing hunger.

A feeling of dread comes with nightfall and as it grows dark, horror threatens to overwhelm me. This is the worst time of my day. Am I going to be told that my parents don't love me, and that's why they don't care enough to come and see me? Of course, and I believe this. I have been abandoned.

In three years' they will only come twice. "your parents don't love you", this monster tells me. He is the only one who loves me, and that's why he takes me to his bed.

Am I going to have to perform disgusting acts on him again tonight; have him inflict lewd and painful acts on me, over and over, calling it love? I lie frozen in my bed,

pretending to be asleep. I hear his deliberate steps along the dormitory between the rows of sleeping boys. Or are they, like me, lying breathless and still in fear? I pray. Let him take someone else.

Tonight, he passes my bed. I let go my breath in one long, thankful shudder. Tonight, I might sleep. But I feel guilty about wanting one of my friends to be abused so I might escape. I feel that somehow this is all my fault. This is what I deserve. I don't deserve anything better. I feel deep shame and fear. I fall asleep weeping.

This has been one day in my life, suffered more than a thousand times over from January 1956 to December 1958.

These predators were our 'protectors' who were entrusted with a duty of care. They were relentless bullies by day and constant, ceaseless abusers by night.

Decades later I still awake from nightmares where I constantly re-live these horrors. I write my story to speak for these children, to give them a voice. I speak for those who didn't survive, that there might be some justice for them.

And I write for my children: that knowledge might bring them some understanding and compassion.

In spite of it all, I am, **STILL STANDING!**

Chapter 1.

The Beginning.

“Hurry up Johnny,” my mother yelled, “the bus is coming”. I left the chook house where I had been feeding our assortment of poultry - bantams, hens and ducks. There were also roosters, but their numbers declined at Christmas and Easter.

The rickety old red and white bus had many stops before ours and the terrain was flat, so we had at least five minutes warning, plenty of time to run up the back steps, fetch my school bag and cross the road. I was five years old and enrolled at Cribb Island State School.

I remember being on parade - fingernail inspection, clean handkerchief, the National Anthem (with hand on heart), roll call, and more than once being prodded by another kid when I was daydreaming, looking out across the sparkling waters of Moreton bay.

Cribb Island was a northern coastal suburb of

Brisbane which was later levelled when the whole area became part of the Brisbane International Airport runway.

The school was a crumbling weatherboard structure where its three rooms housed up to fifty children from grades one to seven. The square rooms were filled with rows of single desks with hinged tops and holes for ink wells. They were covered in initials carved by generations of students determined to leave their mark.

The Education Department had known for years that the building was marked for demolition to make way for the airport, so there was reluctance to spend any money on maintenance. The casement windows rattled when the wind blew in from the bay. The leaking iron roof was loose and threatened to fly away during the Queensland storm season.

In the winter, we felt every cold draught through the cracks in the walls and floor. Most kids carried a school bag on their backs for their books, pencils and lunch. They could have been called 'mystery bags' as some of them were quite disgusting, containing such things as forgotten apple cores, half eaten sandwiches and fused masses of melted boiled lollies. The 'mystery' is how we survived the sea of bacteria swimming there. Much of our learning was by rote and we learned well. Copybook writing was my favourite, and I loved forming the letters and words and keeping 'within the lines'. My teacher

encouraged me and complimented me on my neatness and diligence and I blossomed under these rare compliments. Later I learned to love the language in the words, attempting stories of fiction, with myself as a character that was a brave and dashing hero.

My first teachers fostered in me a lifelong passion for the English language which would take me decades to regain.

We lived there in an isolated farm house during my first year of schooling. At home was my brother Robert and my sisters Cecily and baby Marilyn. High on the hill overlooking our property stood the Nudgee Catholic Seminary, a training college for the Catholic priesthood. At the bottom of their land, opposite our house, was a lagoon, a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Eventually my mother decided that she had had enough of being eaten by mosquitoes and we packed up and moved, poultry and all to Belmont, a southern suburb of Brisbane at Christmas time in 1951.

This high-set weatherboard 'Queenslander' house was a mile from the Belmont tram terminus on a gravel stretch of Birdwood Road.

I was enrolled at Camp Hill State School. Robert didn't turn five until July, so he spent another year at home. Every school day I walked to the terminus and paid the thruppence fare to the conductor.

Father had acquired a Great Dane he named Girlie.

She was the tallest dog I have ever seen and the most beautiful, without one ounce of aggression. Every morning Girlie walked with me to the tram stop. Every afternoon she would be there when I arrived after school. Sometimes if the conductor on the tram missed taking my thruppence fare from me, I would buy an ice-cream and share it with Girlie before heading home.

Girlie died a year later. The vet said she had been poisoned. He was unable to determine whether it had been deliberate or accidental. Father believed she had been 'baited' because of her size. I loved that wonderful dog and was devastated by her loss.

Later, we inherited a billy goat. The theory was that he would act as a lawnmower. My parents soon discovered that goats are not grass eaters, but scrub browsers that will eat practically anything within reach, including clothes and tin cans. Much to mother's dismay her garden was constantly pruned, beside the house stood a huge mango tree. Billy would stand on his hind legs and trim the skirt of the tree, so that from a distance it resembled an umbrella.

Our outhouse was in the back yard and we had to be on our guard when we visited. Billy paid no attention while we walked to the toilet, but coming back was a different story. It was a chase. If you were too slow you received a nasty butt to your rear.

I hated that goat.

The day came when Billy was missing. According to mother, he had butted our father very painfully so he was 'relocated'. We never knew exactly what that meant, but we suspected that he went to heaven.

In 1953 my sister Betty was born, the same year my brother Robert started school. After about a year our family was offered a new housing commission home in nearby Carina Heights. This was twice the distance from the tram, but we didn't have to change schools. We didn't mind the two-mile walk as we could always find a can to kick or something equally exciting to do. We were never in a hurry to get home!

It was around this time that father began drinking to excess after some business failures. From then on, life for me and my siblings was one of constant beatings, physical and mental abuse.

Often we were kept at home for days so the teachers would not see the black and blue welts on our bodies. Another act of Father's cruelty was to leave us kids for days at a time locked up under the highset house that we occupied, while 'He and Mother' would go off on some business journey, and on these occasions we would all sleep together on an old couch placed there for this reason.

The laundry was located under the building so we had plenty of water. A meagre supply of food was left for us.

By the time they returned we would be starving.

Father's beatings would take place in the lounge-room; while holding onto one arm he would flail us with a bamboo stick, while we ran around the room trying to escape the cane. Most times we would wet ourselves as we pleaded that we would, "never do it again" whatever the misdemeanour was considered to be. Many a plea for "one more chance", was ignored. At the end of the flogging we would have our noses rubbed into the urine and then told to clean it up.

Mother tried to intervene many times during these beatings only to suffer a hearty back-hander herself.

Our mum was ten years younger than Father and nineteen years older than me. I looked on my mother as an older sister. My brother Robert and I took to running away from home to escape the beatings, but each time we were found and brought back by the police. This fanned father's wrath even more. On one occasion a policeman returned me to our address in a motorcycle side car.

I asked if I could use the toilet before letting father know we were home.

"That'll be OK," he said, "but I'll be waiting outside the dunny door."

While he kept guard at the door I scaled the breather pipe and squeezed out through the triangular gap between the back wall and the peak of the roof. I slid down outside the building and I made my escape over the

neighbour's fence at the rear of the yard.

I wasn't free for long.

As soon as the policeman realised what had happened he came after me on his motorcycle and nabbed me a few streets away. He was quite irate and I received a hefty clip under the ear. That was nothing compared to what I endured after he had taken me home.