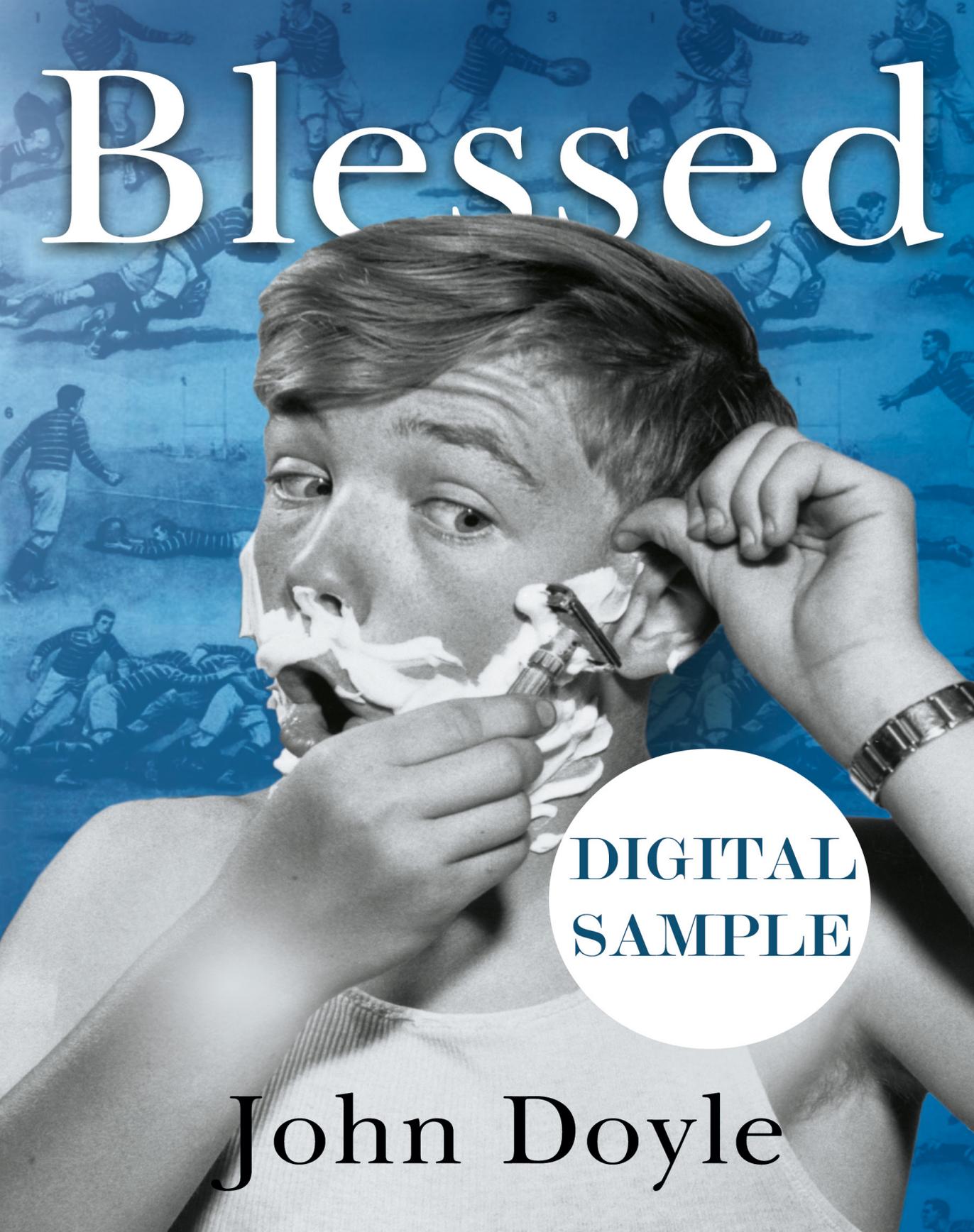
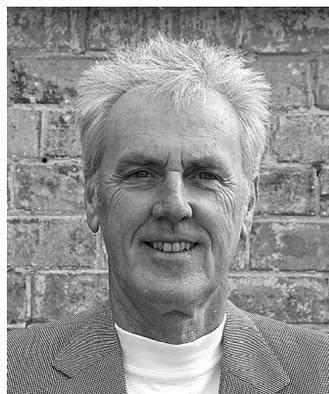


Blessed

A man with brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a white tank top. He is shaving his face with a safety razor and shaving cream. He has a wide-eyed, surprised expression. His left hand is raised to his ear, and he is wearing a metal watch. The background is a solid blue color with a faint, repeating pattern of soccer players in action.

**DIGITAL
SAMPLE**

John Doyle



John Doyle is one of Australia's finest writers for stage and screen. His work spans the theatrical success of *The Pig Iron People* for the Sydney Theatre Company and *Vere (Faith)* for the State Theatre Company of South Australia, to the small screen acclaim of series such as *Changi*, *Marking Time* and *Two Men and a Tinnie* for the ABC.

He created the character of Roy Slaven in 1985, for ABC radio station Triple J. Since 1986, Roy has appeared alongside HG Nelson on various television series, including *Club Buggery*, *The Channel Nine Show*, *Win Roy and HG's Money*, *The Dream*, *The Monday Dump*, *The Ice Dream*, *The Cream*, *The Dream in Athens* and *The Memphis Trousers* and the long-running Sunday afternoon radio sports program *This Sporting Life* on Triple J.

In 2010, John was made a Member of the Order of Australia for his services to entertainment and as a supporter of charitable organisations such as the United Nations Children's Fund in Australia.

Blessed

John Doyle

This is an uncorrected book proof. It has not been proofread. Please note that all quotes for review must be checked against the finished book or with the publisher to ensure accuracy.

*Dedicated to Deanna Doyle,
my partner since the age of twenty and whose skill with the
pencil and brush constantly excites and astounds me*



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Foreword

I have known Roy all my life. When he called out of the blue with a plan to seriously focus on what he is calling his ‘breakout year’, I thought it was a terrific idea and offered him all the encouragement I could muster. The breakout year was 1967. I remember it well. I was there. He wanted his words in ‘book form’. Fine, I thought. Good luck with it. He would have no trouble filling a book with his stories and feats of breathtaking skill.

Quite perversely, he wanted me to write it for him. I was most resistant. But he was dogged and did nothing but badger me for weeks. I agreed to assist on the understanding that he would do most, if not all, of the work. And I would accept the credit for its authorship.

He accepted that and we met up. It was good to see him. I was able to help in the remembering of some things, less certain with others. His recollection of the footy matches I saw

him play that year, and the cricket matches and tennis matches we had together, are very accurate and align perfectly with my memory. To see him play in that year was to never forget him. He was an artist. His tennis was balletic. His cricket was full of grace. His football, sublime.

He had a couple of photos he had taken of our class. I had no memory of the photos being taken at all, but they helped bring back all sorts of forgotten incidents, both good and bad. However, he has, I think, let himself down by inventing things. Unnecessarily. The words he has put in my mouth, for example, are fanciful. But he insisted it was his story and he had the licence to 'call it as he saw it'.

We argued. He then said, without seeing the irony, that if I was to tell it as I saw it, it would be completely self-serving. And, as he had said, it was his story, not mine.

I stopped arguing and rolled the tape recorder, and for a few weeks I would see him for a few hours daily. I would delete my questions from the copy I'd faithfully written up, and let him read his own words. He would then, with a sharp pencil, make some changes – largely around 'tense' issues. For a bloke who showed little aptitude for English at school, he had become a real stickler for correct grammar.

The process of recording Roy's year of 1967 has revived our appreciation for Lithgow and Lithgow people. In the scheme of things, we realised that we had a rare and privileged upbringing. We both agree that it was lucky for us both that we got to know each other and became friends. We have been good for

one another. I envy him his successes and his genius for being so gifted with anything that involves a moving ball. I still shake my head in disbelief whenever I hear him on the radio or see him on TV. In time, the council will probably name a street in Lithgow after him.

I asked him if there was anything of my life he envied. He said, 'No, mate. Not a thing. Not a thing.' Would he ever swap places with me? He shook his head and laughed at me. He was being honest. And that's what I would say about Roy. His overwhelming hallmark is his honesty.

All the characters who appear in these recollections are real. Many are still living. I fear that Roy has been as fanciful in the words he has put in their mouths as well. Like me, I hope they are prepared to forgive him. The disturbing thing for me is, having read his book a few times now, I could be persuaded that everything might be true.



Chapter One

‘Young people need good teachers, like visible angels.’

SAINT JOHN BAPTIST, DE LA SALLE FOUNDER

‘They can’t run without legs.’

FATHER JOHN ‘GRASSY’ GRANNAL, LITHGOW SHAMROCKS COACH

‘What do you take me for? A baboon?’

BROTHER HUGH CORCORAN, PRINCIPAL, DE LA SALLE, LITHGOW

Lithgow in summer often liked to surprise with a freezing day. Mercifully, Dean and Doyle had got to school early enough to get the fire going in the classroom.

Brother Connor appeared to be looking carefully at the details of the large sash window. He didn’t appear to be interested in what view the window revealed. He hummed quietly. A tuneless hum.

Otherwise, the Third Form classroom was silent.

He then drew a deep breath and hummed one long note. He stopped when he was red in the face, turned and shouted, ‘Time?’

Dean and Doyle put their hands up. ‘Dean?’

Dean stood. ‘Fifty-two seconds, Brother.’

‘Doyle?’

Doyle stood. ‘Fifty-three seconds, Brother.’

‘Correct. We see eye to eye with time, do we not, Doyle?’

‘We do, Brother.’

Dean and Doyle sat down.

‘On your feet, Slaven.’

I stood. Brother Connor returned to his interest in the window frame.

The window was in good order. Closed, mercifully, the temperature outside being three degrees Celsius, forty-five degrees Fahrenheit, and Dean knew it in Kelvin. And it was windy. The wind came up through the floorboards of the classroom. The classroom was part of the original sandstone structure built in 1890 as an Anglican boarding school. On one side of the room was a fireplace, the row of desks beside it referred to as the Tropics. On the other side of the room was the Tundra. The fire was lit and tendered to by the more responsible fellows – Dean, Doyle and O’Brien – regular members of the Tropics. Crawlers, basically.

The Tundra was inhabited by myself, Brennan, Benson, Flynn, Hall and Brewer. There were ten others in the Temperate Zone – Mills, Wall, Dowd, Marsland, Lennehan and company.

Brother Connor was a dapper man whose black soutane and prominent white starched collar were pressed and neat. He

hummed with his hands in his pockets, one clutching a rubber waddy that poked out as a stiff cock might, albeit off-centre.

He turned and fixed me in his gaze. He stopped humming.

‘Slaven,’ he said. ‘Tell me why I should be interested in triangles.’

Brother Connor liked to set traps. His pleasure came from embarrassing us. And in giving him the slightest reason to get out his waddy and deliver either one or two cuts across the hand. He was by any measure a weird bloke. I took my time.

‘Umm . . .’

‘Don’t mumble, boy. Well?’

Silence and giggles from Benson and Brewer.

‘Lord help us, Slaven. Dean?’

Dean stood. A large fellow. ‘Triangulation can be used to establish the height of an object, Brother.’

Brother Connor nodded. ‘Now, Slaven, how might Dean here establish the height of the northern wall of the academy through triangulation?’

‘Umm . . . he’d probably eat the triangle, Brother, climb the northern wall and jump off, getting Doyle to measure the time it took to hit the ground. Work it out from that.’

Giggles from Brewer. And Brennan. And Benson.

‘Quite the wit today, Slaven. Describe a triangle for me.’

‘Three-sided figure, Brother.’

‘Indeed it is. Sit down, Slaven. On your feet, Benson.’

Benson stood.

Brother Connor continued. ‘Doyle, if I was a betting man, what odds would you give Benson here answering a question correctly about our friend, the triangle?’

Doyle stood. ‘Depends on the degree of difficulty, Brother. You could well frame a question that no one could answer.’

Brother Connor looked heavenward, smiling with amusement. ‘Good point, Doyle. And well made. Therefore I want you to frame both the question and the market.’

Doyle thought. ‘Name a type of triangle is the question. One to four the odds.’

Brother Connor thought about this. ‘An eighty per cent chance of you getting this right, Benson. Doyle here has more confidence in you than I have. Well, Benson? Name a type of triangle.’

Benson drew breath. He knew he was out of his depth. ‘Does it have to be big or small, Brother?’

Brother Connor looked stunned. Then burst into laughter. ‘Benson, I don’t know what rabbit hole your deliciously damaged mind is taking us down, but I’m intrigued.’ He closed in on Benson. ‘Big interests me.’

Benson looked relieved. He said confidently, ‘A sphinx, Brother.’

Laughter.

The bell rang. Brother Connor took out his strap and approached Doyle.

‘On your feet, Doyle. Left hand.’ Doyle held out his left hand.

‘Those odds were unacceptable. You will guarantee Benson can name three types of triangle tomorrow. Understood?’

‘Yes, Brother.’

Brother Connor brought down the strap across Doyle’s fingers. He flinched in pain.

‘Dismissed.’

I quite enjoyed seeing someone from the Tropics getting the strap. Getting the cuts was as common as shivering in the Tundra. It amused Brother Connor to occasionally give a crawler the cuts. Kept them from being too up themselves, which they were prone to be. It was rare to see Doyle having to hold out his hand. He hated it. He was angry. Close to tears, he blew his hand and packed his port one-handed.

The Brothers lived in the old building. The principal was Brother Hugh, a bloke who had two gears – benign weirdo or red-faced bellowing autocrat. Hard to put an age on him, maybe forty-five or so. His favourite saying was ‘What do you take me for? A baboon?’ Oddly enough, in certain light, he looked exactly like a baboon.

Brother Hubert was ancient. Tall, with shocking arthritis in his hands and all the hallmarks of some sort of senile decline. He often had a stalactite of snot, which dangled before attaching itself to his chin, whereupon it was wiped away by a large white handkerchief. He took us for English.

Rounding out the brotherhood was Brother Michael, a fit, young, friendly bloke who played tennis with Dean and Doyle and me on occasion. He was too young to be seriously

feared and I think he found it easier to make friends with the students than the other weirdos he had to live with.

There were two lay teachers – they lived together in a small house near the tech on the other side of town. Jack Connolly was sixty and smelled of the tobacco he kept in his pipe, which was either in his hand, in his mouth, or in the top pocket of his brown tweed jacket. He was of florid complexion and had hairs of different colours growing in the middle of his nose. He was the woodwork/metalwork specialist. His housemate was Harold. Harold was in his early thirties, fit, but with vague suggestions of a drug habit and assorted lifestyle issues. Geography was his go. Harold could be embarrassingly intimate.

‘Funny thing, boys. Jack hasn’t a clue. The package arrives from Sydney. Early. He’s up. I’m not. He hasn’t a clue. I had to run down bloody Mort Street in my underpants. He hasn’t a clue. I was . . . yeah. Jack. Anyway . . .’

Harold would focus. Be disappointed in himself. ‘Where was I, Doyle?’

‘The savannah, Sir.’

It’s 1967. In Lithgow.

•

People who visited Lithgow described it not as ‘the glorious Gateway to the Central West’, but as the Arsehole of the Universe. They probably only saw it when it was insanely hot, which it often was in summer; or when it was bitterly cold, which it

mostly was in winter. The architecture wasn’t fabulous – fibro homes beside rows of semi-detached Victorian miners’ quarters, with a few Federation brick piles scattered throughout. Generally speaking, the brick homes used a particular depression-inducing brick that was probably locally produced.

To anyone driving through the town in July, when the fierce westerly was blowing and the sleet was in the air, it would have indeed seemed like the Arsehole of the Universe. Especially had they stopped and looked at the clothing and bedsheets blowing on backyard clotheslines. Specs of black coal dust created lines of grey stains down every item. The visitor would have breathed in a rich atmosphere, with every chimney pushing out thick streams of black smoke. Hogarth would have been drawn to etch every street and lane.

To me, it was beautiful. It was home. I had no desire to live anywhere else. Ever. There was a communal enjoyment in meeting the town’s challenges. And when the sun shone and the wind held its breath, in the nooks of the finger valleys and the ridges that ringed them was to be found sublime, glorious pristine beauty. Wallaby, kangaroo, wombat, parrot, echidna, kookaburra, magpie, currawong in eucalypt forests that stretched forever.

It was a coal mining town, an iron and steel making town and then an arms manufacturing city. Most importantly, it was a town that appreciated sport. Cricket had A grade and B grade competitions, Rugby League was played at first grade level, reserve grade, under twenty-ones, under eighteens and under sixteens. Hockey was played in two grades, basketball at two

grades and the council provided tennis courts for free. Squash was popular. As was netball. And swimming. And bowls. And snooker. And the greyhounds. And Marjorie Jackson was our most famous champion, being the fastest runner on the planet for four years in the 1950s. Barry Rushworth was our greatest Rugby League player – he toured with the Australian Kangaroos. And Nancy Hill was a member of the Australian Women’s Basketball team.

I was always active. I loved competition. Loved competing with blokes at anything. And loved being in a team. And I didn’t mind the freezing cold. Or the heat. I could play sport all year round. So, Lithgow was made for me.

•

De La Salle Academy was a boys-only school. It was on the outskirts of town in the suburb of Littleton. Saint Patrick’s was the Catholic girls’ school and it sat in the middle of town beside Saint Patrick’s Church, the presbytery and Saint Joseph’s Convent. We’d see the girls every first Friday at a mass held at midday. We’d travel by either bus or bike. The bike riders would arrive first and show off in front of the girls who gathered outside the church under the steely supervision of the nuns, dressed in their imposing brown habits. I preferred to take the bus. Blokes who rode ended up sweaty and looking like dicks.

Flynn rode once. He was showing off in front of the girls when his foot slipped off the pedal, causing his scrotum to collide with the bike’s crossbar. This inflicted great pain, and

the trouser cuff of his right dangling leg got caught up in the chain and then into the sprocket. He and his bike collapsed sideways into the gutter. While the combined schools roared with laughter, three girls we knew came to his assistance. Barbara, Deidre and Anne. He never rode to mass again.

When the bus arrived we’d line up and Brother Connor would take charge. I liked to sit where I could see the girls. One I looked out for in particular. Susan Morgan. I was in love with her. We had bonded at a footy match last season. I’d seen her with her sister and two other girls watching the game from near the sideline. We were defending against the Lithgow High under sixteens and I saw a terrific opportunity – one of their players, Mark Wilkinson, had made a break down the sideline. I was in cover and lined him up to time the tackle so I’d be right in front of Susan. I timed it pretty well and cut his legs out from under him, but hit my nose on his knee, breaking it. Blood everywhere.

The referee was Wayne Hammond’s dad. Mister Hammond stopped the match, looked at my nose and said, ‘It’s a clean break, Roy, which is a good thing.’ He looked at the horrified Susan and her group, noticed she was eating a Paddle Pop, and asked her to quickly finish it. Then he took the stick, wiped it on my shorts, snapped it in two and shoved a half up each of my nostrils to re-centre my nose. Hurt like fuck. ‘Keep your head back for a few minutes. You’ll have to go off.’

I left the field. I looked at Susan and thanked her for her stick. She told me to do what Mister Hammond had said to

do. So I lay down not far from the sideline and she sat with me. I learnt that she was a bit of a swot, was good at Maths and hated Rugby League.

‘What about cricket?’ I asked.

‘Pretty boring.’

‘Tennis?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘What’s your favourite song?’

“‘Eleanor Rigby’”.

‘What about “Friday On My Mind”?’

She was in two minds.

‘It’s the best song ever written.’

She grinned. ‘No. Not a chance.’

At that point Brother Connor arrived on the scene. The game was over and we had won. He wore his suit with dog collar. Hands in pockets, he paused to drink in the scene.

‘Well, well, well. How sweet is this, Slaven? A perfect tableau of the Crimean War. A fallen soldier and nurse Nightingale in attendance. And it’s an heroic story. An important tackle, Slaven. An act of bravery. Susan Morgan, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Brother.’

He looked at her closely. ‘Remember, Susan Morgan, a young woman is measured by the company she keeps.’

Then Mister Hammond joined us. He bent down and took my head in his hands. He examined my nose and nodded his approval. ‘It’ll be as right as rain in three weeks. Leave the sticks

in for a couple of days, then tug ’em out. Okay?’ I nodded. ‘Well played, young fella.’ He nodded to Brother Connor and walked off.

I stood up, Susan’s sister and mates joined us, and Brother Connor said he’d drive me home in the old Humber Hawk the Brothers were starting to find unreliable. But we had bonded, me and Susan Morgan. The opportunities to see her were few. Mass, however, was one.

•

Mass could be pretty dull. Never an exciting show, and made worse on this particular day with the ritual being suspended for the first time for some singing of ‘Kumbaya’ by Sister Francis and her haltingly strummed nylon-stringed acoustic guitar. She was joined by the three Cullen girls. Boring as buggery. Mind you, she would have made ‘Friday On My Mind’ as boring as buggery as well. I liked music, but what Sister Francis produced wasn’t music. It was anti-music. It was as if she had a mission to kill music. I caught Susan’s eye during the performance and mimed a yawn. She laughed. The exchange was seen by both Brother Connor and Sister Pius.

The only other thing of note from that mass was that at the end of the sermon – can’t remember a thing about it but it did go on – Doyle, who was one of the three altar boys, fell over because his right leg had gone dead. A few of us laughed. I could see he felt like shit, because he looked stupid. He limped delivering the cruets.

I had auditioned to be an altar boy at the same time as Doyle, Dean, Brewer, O'Brien and Flynn. It was in the front room of the presbytery when we were in fourth class. Father Whelan did the audition. He was a tall, ancient man with an Irish accent. He said he was looking for boys who 'had the head for the Latin'. He was also looking for boys whose parents could afford the cost of the vestments – a red surplice and white soutane, red slippers and a starched collar held together with a brass stud. While I had the head, things were a bit challenged at home and forking out money for the costume was quickly ruled out. Dad's work at the Genders coal mine had come to an end and he was relying on seasonal shearing work, which was sporadic and unreliable.

It was at the start of this year that Dad left permanently. Mum got some shiftwork at Berlei's, which she hated, so much of the time I pretty well had the house to myself.

The house was fibro with two bedrooms and had been painted a light green inside and out sometime in the 1940s. All the floors were linoleum apart from the laundry out the back, which was concrete. Dad had made most of the furniture, which had a distinctive solid style. Mum had made a lot of cushions, which made most of the seating really comfortable. And while the kitchen was sparse, the stove worked well even though the oven didn't. My room had a three-quarter bed, a chest of three drawers and a broomstick Dad had nailed across the picture railing in the corner to use for hanging clothes.

Home was very comfortable. Freezing, though, in winter. In summer it could become an oven.

Anyway, it didn't worry me too much not being an altar boy. Generally speaking, altar boys were crawlers. Tropics types. With the exception of Brewer. He was a rare breed being the only altar boy in the Tundra. He had a terrific imagination. His composition 'A Day in the Life of a Penny' was the stuff of legend. He read it out in class. When the penny ended up in Brother Hubert's underpants, the class was on the floor in stitches. The room roared. The ancient Brother, who was also known as Sherb, laughed his head off. He grabbed Brewer gently by the ears and kissed the top of his head. Sherb was proud of him.

But Brewer sometimes just couldn't shut up. That's how he ended up in the Tundra. He used to nick some of the altar wine and sell it to interested parties. There were two types: standard and super. Super was wine that had been blessed by the priest. How he got it, I don't know. Standard was out of the bottle, not out of the cruet. A cruet was what the priests called a small glass jug. Wine and water were delivered to the priest in cruets during mass just before the consecration. Brewer sold it from rinsed Fanta bottles. I bought five cents' worth of standard. It was sweet and was just the thing to have on a cold day – it would warm you up. I really liked it. Special was twice the price. Never tried it. Brennan did. He thought it was stronger. Brewer kept this up for a couple of months, so he could easily afford a top-shelf genuine Russell yoyo when

they became the rage later that year. Then the supply dried up. He wasn't caught, but one of the priests must have noticed the rate at which the wine was disappearing. Pretty much whatever happened in the sacristy was a mystery to me, as mysterious as transubstantiation or the need of the word cruet.

And the mass was changing. It was suddenly a post-Vatican II world. There was an attempt to make the mass more accessible. This meant the Latin was no longer being used and the priest, for the first time, faced the congregation during the consecration, so that what used to appear as mysterious no longer had much mystery at all. In addition, the priest was now asking the congregation to turn to each other and offer a 'sign of peace'. Most of us hated that. Some of the men, like Mister Goggin, would turn and stretch out his hand to as many people as he could reach, clutch and say with an enthusiastic grin, 'Peace be with you.' It forced you to make contact with people you didn't know. I think I caught a cold from Mrs Cullen in the pew in front of me, when she turned and sneezed in my face as she tried to say 'Peace be with you.' Mum then got the cold from me. The whole confection was just embarrassing.

Embarrassing, too, was the introduction of members of the congregation reading the epistle from the pulpit. Mister Seaton earned sniggers because of his stutter, which made his stutter worse. Sometimes his performance took twelve minutes. O'Brien timed it. Palpable relief when he stepped away and tiptoed by the altar on his way to rejoining us. It must have been his penance. Father Keogh's idea, probably. And Mister

Mierzac's English was so poor that no one had a clue what he was saying. It might as well have been Latin.

But the most embarrassing thing by a mile was bringing the acoustic guitar into the church. It encouraged the largely untalented player to bring the result of hundreds of hours of unschooled practice out of the bedroom, where it should have stayed.

The guitar was used as an uplifting distraction while the Holy Communion was being received. Often the communion would be well and truly finished while we listened to the Cullen sisters' recent additions to their set list. The Seekers generally supplied their material. 'A World of Our Own' sadly failed to get the congregation singing along, despite enthusiastic encouragement from the Cullen sisters to do so. After a month, they were told to limit it to two songs only. Not eight.

•

Sister Pius apparently gave Susan Morgan a fearful dressing-down for giggling during 'Kumbaya'. And Brother Connor gave me four cuts. I didn't mind. It was a small price to pay for having a genuine contact with the girl of my dreams, and not long later I found out where she lived – in Enfield Avenue, Littleton. It wasn't far from the academy. Littleton wasn't the only suburb of Lithgow. There were a few others. Oaky Park. McKellars Park. The Vale of Clwyd. Most of the streets around Littleton had names associated with either World War I or armaments. Bayonet Street, Passchendale Street, Rifle Parade,

Suvla Street, Fallen Digger Lane, Lone Pine Avenue, Tobruk Street, Carbine Street, Amiens Street, Bren Street, Ordnance Avenue and Pozieres Street. Our school was in Rabaul Street. Dean lived in Ordnance Avenue and Doyle in Martini Parade.

Brother Connor to Doyle. 'Doyle. Martini Parade. Martini. Who was Martini? Any idea?'

Doyle was quick to reply. 'A hero, Brother. The first Anzac to fall.'

Brother Connor was quite moved. 'Really?' He returned to his ritual examination of the window frame. Doyle stayed standing. There was silence but for currawongs.

'Where was Martini born, Doyle?'

'Italy, Brother.'

'Italy's a big place. Can you be more specific?'

Currawongs.

'Assisi, I think, Brother.'

'Assisi? Just like Saint Francis.'

'Yes, Brother.'

'And how did he come to be an Anzac?'

'Family migrated.'

Brother Connor nodded. 'Catholic?'

'Of course, Brother.'

'And settled in Lithgow?'

Doyle nodded.

'Trade?'

'Furniture-maker, Brother.'

Brother Connor pondered. Then, 'On your knees, boys.' We all slid off our seats and knelt. 'We're going to offer up a prayer for Martini of Assisi.' Then he reconsidered. 'Although, strictly speaking, as an Anzac, he should be Martini of Lithgow, don't you think, Doyle?'

'Yes, Brother.'

I said, 'Shouldn't he be Martini of Littleton?'

Brother Connor went off. 'Slaven, you are an idiot and a worm. What is Slaven, Benson?'

'An idiot and a worm, Brother.'

'Yes. And you'd know, Benson. Let us pray. Hail Mary, full of grace . . .'

Three weeks later, Doyle got four. Brother Connor had told the Martini story at some fundraiser for the Catholic Youth Club and been laughed at. Martini, apparently, was an Englishman who designed and manufactured rifles.

'Honestly, Brother, it's what I was told.'

'Why don't I believe you?'

'I don't know, Brother.'

Brother Connor gripped his waddy with white knuckles. I had never seen him more angry. He began to shout. 'Who told you?'

'Alan, Brother.'

'Alan? Historian is he? Of note? Alan?'

'I don't think so, Brother.'

'Who is he? Who is Alan?'

'He's my uncle, Brother.'

Brother Connor almost writhed with anger. His whole body was involved.

‘When? When did he tell you?’ He was close to tears of rage.

Then Doyle said, ‘Last Christmas, Brother. He made a fool of me, too, Brother.’

‘Doyle, Doyle, Doyle, there is something that doesn’t smell right. Did anyone else witness this story of Uncle Alan’s?’

‘The whole family, Brother.’

Brother Connor paced for a time. Then stopped and smiled. ‘We have a telephone now, boys. In the house.’ He propped beside Doyle. ‘Is there a telephone in the Doyle household?’

Doyle showed signs of fear. I think we all knew where this was going.

‘Yes, Brother.’

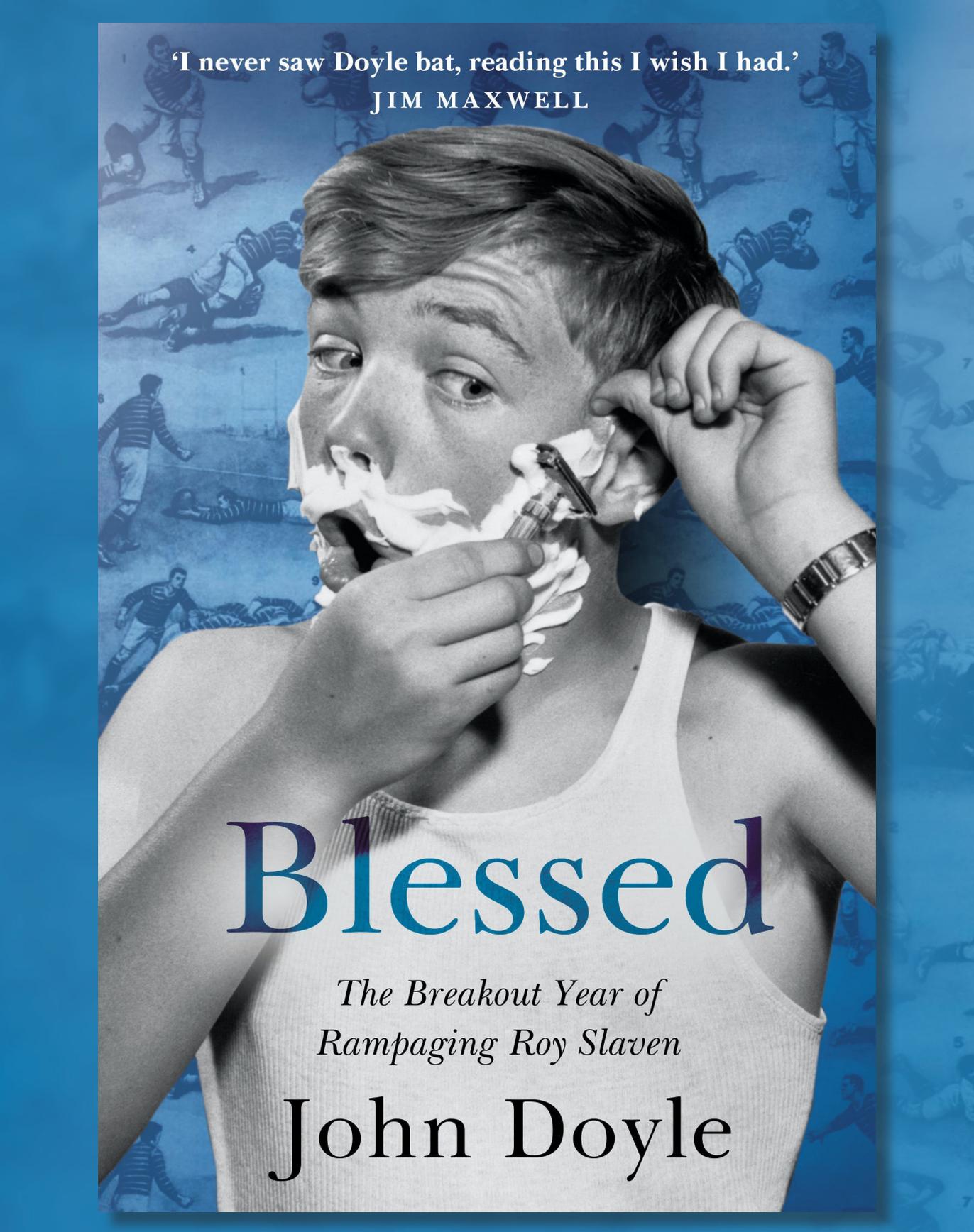
‘Doyle, you have a choice here. I am going to set the class an exercise, and we are going to go and telephone your mother and have this story confirmed here and now. If it is not confirmed you will receive six and be further punished for being known at home to have lied to a member of the order of Saint John Baptist. Clearly a sin. A mortal sin. If you confirm with me now that the story is of your invention, then you will receive four. The thing is, Doyle, you take things too far.’

Doyle had form in getting teachers into trouble. I respected him for this. The year before, Dean had written a play for some competition the library was throwing. It came second. It was a short piece, in which a murder is solved by a shrewd detective. The top three plays were put on in the high school

auditorium one Thursday night. I went along. Doyle was playing the detective. All the Brothers were present, and quite a few family members and members of the public. There would have been a hundred people all up. The curtain lifts, and there is Doyle with a pipe. He had tobacco in it and lit it and smoked throughout the performance. He used the pipe for gesturing and what have you. I can’t remember a thing about the play. But I remember the pipe. There were a lot of laughs, but I noticed that Brother Connor was furious that a boy would be smoking so boldly in public. A De La Salle boy. He glared at young Brother Michael, who was the man in charge of the production.

There was a scene in the car park later as the Brothers loaded into the Humber Hawk. Young Brother Michael was sent to Coventry. The pipe-smoking Doyle went unpunished on this occasion.

Brother Connor savoured the four he gave Doyle for the Martini incident. He insisted all be on the left hand and waited five minutes between each blow. Doyle stood in painful anticipation for most of the period.



'I never saw Doyle bat, reading this I wish I had.'

JIM MAXWELL

Blessed

*The Breakout Year of
Rampaging Roy Slaven*

John Doyle