

'Walk With You', by Patrick Keady is available for only A\$15 (plus postage). To order the book, please:

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Thank you!

INTRO

Intro

“Excuse me, would you like one of these?” the stranger said kindly as he thrust out the small paper leaflet before me. I paused, then accepted the tract.

‘Thanks’.

It was Sunday and I was walking home down the LA Boulevard enjoying the sunlight after Mass.

‘Have a nice day’ the stranger added and walked on. I opened the piece of paper. I’d received these before and was starting to get used to them now.

‘Have you been saved?’ the text read.

‘If you were to die right now, do you know where you would spend eternity?’

Did I know? Do you know?

The question was direct and blunt; it was out there. No one asked questions like this back in Australia. It was a question that had already begun to probe its way into my thoughts at Uni. It had poked and prodded persistently away in the corners of my brain, and now finally rose up inside me in a different form, as a request, a demand for an answer;

‘So what is salvation? Do I have it? When did I get it?’ I’d grown up as a Catholic, knowing that ‘God was there’ - somewhere - but recently different experiences and people were beginning to challenge me to dig further, to pull apart what I thought I already had all together.

I read further:

**Jesus said,
 “Do not be surprised at my saying
 ‘You must be born again’...
 Unless a person is born again they cannot
 enter the kingdom of Heaven.”**

John 3:7,3

Well I must’ve been one of the ones He said that for because I *was* surprised! I was also curious, intrigued - this was stuff you didn’t hear a lot about in Coonamble, the small hometown in New South Wales where I grew up. So why not? What was the big secret? No lightning, no thunderbolts, but inside me something ‘clicked one hand to the right’. It was the desire to know more.

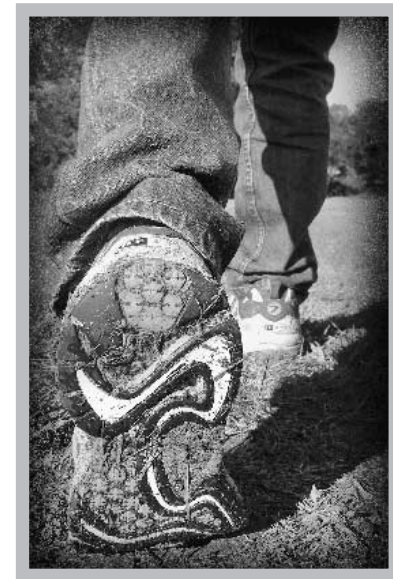
And so began a journey that had begun a thousand times already, a journey that I thought was only just beginning. It was a journey that had begun 21 years before in my childhood, though I wasn’t aware of it at the time. It was a walk with Jesus.

So what about you? Have you ever thought about Heaven? Is there life after this one? What is it, where is it and how do I get there? And what’s all this ‘getting saved / born-again’ stuff some Christians go on with? Isn’t that stuff just for Protestants?

Well, while it’s nice to have short easy answers to all of life’s big questions, I reckon this calls for a little bit more than that. *‘How do I get to HEAVEN and what is Gods plan for my life?’* There are simple answers to this question, but if you’re anything like me you’d rather find out for yourself. So rather than sidestep the question with a smart bible quote or some deep theological statement, I’m gonna backtrack into the story of my own life as a young guy growing up and share with you some of the stuff I’ve learned along the way.

You can make up your own mind what you think at the end. Until we get there though, try to put any preconceptions you have about God or Christianity or Church or blah blah blah aside ‘cos that stuff will just get in the way. If not, that’s fine. Just suck in some fresh air, click in, and enjoy the ride

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VERSE ONE

growin' up

I wasn't always this 'holy good boy' by any means.

(Well, I did wear sandals and socks to primary school but I'm trying to put that behind me now). Yeah, it's true, I wore sandals and socks to school; but that's not all. I also happened to be good at reading, singing, creative writing, art, acting, and boy was *this* an image I seriously had to shake! Try as I may to get rid of this curse, the opportune time presented itself in fifth class when I got into my first fight - or should I say, my first fight got me into it.

It was pecking-order time on the soccer field among us fifth class boys. I used to get picked on and bullied a bit already by some of the tougher boys than myself. I guess they thought I was a bit of a nerd being so arty and talented and stuff.

Anyway, this other kid (who probably needed a few more rungs up the ladder himself) decided a good push and punch shouldn't be too much of a threat to a goody-two-sandals like me. So straight after kick off I received this shove in the chest and the challenge was on.

Now, to this day I don't remember clearly how it happened, but out of nowhere, before I knew it, my two hands had flung out in a flurry in front of me (mostly out of panic) and my aggressor was now standing still, stunned. His nose was bleeding like crazy, flowing like a river down his shirt and into his shorts. In zero time the infamous schoolyard cry "FIGHT! FIGHT!" had gone out and every child in the school was circled around us in a human boxing ring, thirsty for some action.

This was my big moment. The opportunity of a lifetime. I dared not pass it up. So I relaxed, skipped around a bit and

began to show off, throwing in a few classy jabs, all of which completely missed. Eventually the teacher walked on over,

“Come on, break it up”.

The crowd began to disperse and I was sent to the principal’s office. As I walked away I became aware that *Angela* was watching, the girl I was ‘going with’ (though I was mostly too embarrassed to ever talk to her). As I walked past my arms seemed to lift strangely as if I was now a musclebound fighter with newly enlarged biceps that forced them out from my side. I knew she was smiling. Score.

All this brought a smile of relief to my face as the certainty sunk in that very day; Patrick Keady the nerd, the sandal-wearer, mummy’s good little boy, was *OUTTA HERE*.

Sound familiar? Ever had an image you hated and wanted desperately to get rid of? That’s what I did. When I got to high school I chucked soccer and played football. I did push-ups and sit-ups every night until I had a six-pack of iron and new biceps to experiment with on my younger brother Thomas. (Fun - for me!).

Hormones were good to me, shooting me up in size above others in my year and giving me facial hair in Year 8 which meant I was the first one in my group to shave (a huge event). I remember my girlfriend giving me a blue Gillette shaver for my 14th birthday, which I took as a compliment to my evident masculinity - pity I didn’t pick up that it was more a massive hint to farm the crop I had growing above my lip!

I made a new bunch of friends at high school, and quickly set into place a yearly tradition called the ‘Keady Shed Parties’, which became the annual booze-up for my birthday out on our farm at the shearing shed where we all got drunk, kissed girls and vomited copious amounts of alcohol. All which meant of course that I, ‘who once was lost’ in sincere danger of toxic nerdism, was now officially ‘COOL’; the ultimate compliment for a growing teenage ego-head like myself.

I became a ringleader of our unofficial gang - ‘the Hilux Hooligans’ - so named after my dad’s 4X4 Hilux that we trashed into the ground on many a night going shooting, running over Kangaroo’s, dodging trees and driving into town to swerve down the streets, ring the Church bells at 3am, and return to crash the night camping in a paddock. I smoked, I drank, I swore, I was sex starved; but still, I was basically your average teenage guy.

My parents dragged me along to Mass every Sunday, where even now you can still see my friends and my initials carved into the pews. That was my dad’s ultimate revenge after every shed party;

“Come on boys! Time for Mass.”

We’d be as hung over as ever, trying not to faint through the service, which is where the pew carving idea came from.

Big Hint 1: Don’t think your parents are dumb! Half the time they know exactly what you’re doing and tried the same sort of things themselves when they were 16.

After Mass Dad would then take us back to the farm for a days torture cutting off lambs tails and testicles (called lamb marking) in the hot sun. I reckon he chuckled to himself every year! Thanks dad.

I wasn’t a *total* rebel. I did get my mates to come with me to ‘youth group’ for a year. We used to steal the youth leaders pipe tobacco, crawl into a manhole under the church and smoke it when youth group was on. Life was meant to be lived right?

Then there was the time I took dad’s new car for a burn, the Statesman Caprice (or ‘Australian Cadillac’ as he liked to call it). To this day I don’t know what he was thinking letting me drive it home by myself anyway. Boys and cars - especially fast ones - were made to go together.

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There was just one missing ingredient to this opportunity: *recognition*. And particularly the female sort. What good would it be if I drove this baby all the way home by myself with no one to notice me doing so?

A quick alteration in schedule and I was soon ‘doing a lap of the main,’ a fine small-town hoon tradition that so far I’d had to stand on the sidewalk and watch while all the 21yr old revheads crawled up and down the main street in their cars with all our 16yr old girls inside.

But all that was about to change as I turned right and did the infamous slow crawl (compulsory arm and head hanging out the window) first down one and then the other side of Coonamble’s thriving CBD. Sure enough, by the time I had completed my inaugural lap of hoon honour I had collected a handful of girls and mates in the back, all ready to see how fast ‘the Australian Cadillac’ could really go. Needless to say, I let it rip.

Surprisingly, we all made it home alive, and with heaps of time to spare before mum and dad could arrive home to wreck the fun.

Until the phone rang.

My brother Danny hung up and turned to us with a serious face, “Dad’s wondering where you are because you’re meant to be home by now but a friend of his just told him he saw you driving down the main street with a car full of friends. So you better get them home *NOW* then get the hell back here!”

Woops. A tight knot of panic in the throat. I shrugged it off like I wasn’t fazed, but inside I knew it was time to go – fast.

Let me just say the drive back to town was a lot faster than the drive out! Hastily dropping off the rent-a-crowd I quickly rang home to see how much time I had left to ‘beat the olds back’ and pretend like nothing had ever happened.

Danny once again answered the phone; “Dad and mum are home and you’re in big trouble! You better get back here *now*.” I could hear dad raving in the background, until he yanked the

phone off Danny and let me have it;

“Listen here, you better get that car back home *right now*, and when you do you better run bloody fast ‘cos I’m gonna kick your ___ butt into next week!” Click.

Woops.

I drove home very carefully, using the blinkers all the way. I was replaying dad’s words over and over in my head; that kick in the butt and how he was gonna go off had me worried BIG TIME. As I approached the house, I could even see the kitchen light on and the figure of my dad waiting up - *for me*. Oh yeah. There was only one thing left to do. I decided to face the consequences of my actions like a man.

Speeding the car up until I had enough momentum to carry me home, with 300 metres to go I killed the engine, flicked the lights and cruised silently past the house like a secret agent, praying like crazy that he didn’t see or hear a thing. Then, like a pup with his tail between his legs I snuck in the back door, crawled into bed and faked instant sleepedom. Award for bravery, I tell ya.

My heart pounded about half an hour later as I sensed the figure of my dad standing at the door. ‘You’re asleep, You’re asleep!’ I mentally convinced myself. He finally turned silently and walked down the hall.

Whew.

The next day I had it coming. I couldn’t hide in my room forever. I walked down the hallway to the kitchen and awaited the nostril-blasts from hell.

But the nostril blasts never came. Just the sound of *whistling*. Whistling? ‘This is bizarre’ I thought. I crept quietly forward. Dad was whistling and singing away making a cup of tea as he is often known to do, apparently oblivious to the appearance of the son he was meant to kick the butt-into-kingdom-come of.

He smiled and greeted me; “Hey Pat! Want a cup of tea?”

What did he just say? A cup of tea? Not a kick in the butt? Had he forgotten?

“Thanks” I answered cautiously and sat down, still waiting for the trick card.

But the trick card never came. Instead he proceeded to make happy conversation about the day ahead as if nothing had even happened the night before.

Incredible.

‘Something strange is going on here’ I remember thinking as I walked away from that table, scott-free. It all felt familiar to me somehow.

And then I remembered; it was that story of ‘the Prodigal Son’ I’d heard my whole life growing up from the nuns who’d taught me at convent school. The one where this son goes off and parties hard, blows all his dad’s money and comes home crawling, expecting a major butt-kick, like me. But instead the father in Jesus’ story (representing God) did the unpredictable and threw a huge party for his son. Instead of being met with anger, he was met with mercy. Forgiveness instead of justice. Leniency instead of severity. Crazy, crazy, crazy.

That day my dad taught me the greatest lesson of all, one that I will carry with me for life. And that is – *God is a Father just like that*; and the way he views me, and thinks of me, and responds to all my stuff-ups is just like that.

I reckon that’s pretty cool.

I look back now on this whole teenage era and still laugh. It was a fun time, full of anger, passion and testosterone. All I really wanted was some recognition and attention. *And freedom*, LOTS of freedom. What was the crime in that? Little did I know how I’d receive it and where it would eventually come from.

It was Yr10 at Coonamble High, and there was my Mum. She was standing up on MY assembly, at MY school, telling the WORLD that a ‘religious retreat’ thing was going to be on at OUR home this weekend and that they were all welcome to come!!! My friends choked back giggles and nudged me in the ribs. I just wanted to crawl into the concrete. *‘Mum, mum,*

how could you do this to me?! This is my LIFE you’re messing with!’ I think she knew that full well.

And so the fateful day came around. Mum had dug the knife in even further, forcing me to get my mates to come along, after ringing all their parents first. I was doomed. This was definitely NOT in my image plan.

So, reluctantly, there we were, our shirts off playing tennis, glistening muscles rippling in the sun as mum drives past with a car full of... girls... from the neighbouring town. Hey, things were starting to look up! Who said they didn’t like retreats?

Well, the weekend came, went, and I loved it. For three days we stayed up, played up and had a heap of good fun. The religious stuff wasn’t bad either. Actually, it was pretty good. The different thing was that they talked about Jesus and God and stuff as if He was actually *interesting*, as if He was down on our level, someone who understood me and my friends and all our teenage life issues. Even more, as someone who *liked me* - as I was! (Was that allowed?) At the end we all had to write these affirmation letters to each other and all the girls were crying. Yeah OK, I guess I liked it too.

I look back now on this Yr 10 camp and see the seeds of change that were planted in me then. I wasn’t about to turn into a ‘freak’ or anything but I really liked this Jesus guy. He hung out with prostitutes and outcasts and people like that whom all the grownup religious people judged. People like...well, my new girlfriend for example, one of the girls who’d driven up in the car on that first day. As a 16 year old who’d been living with a 21 year old guy, needless to say my mum’s antennae went straight up! We sent her crazy all weekend trying to keep an eye on us as we kept disappearing for long walks - I don’t know what she was worried about, nothing happened.

But something else *did* happen, and it was within this teenage boys heart. I found in this girl an opportunity to begin to truly see people as Jesus saw them.

God was on the scene.

Sorry, I forgot to mention something. Over the four years I was at Coonamble High I discovered a new creative outlet for my sudden heightened interest in the female species – *song writing*. As a fairly musical nerd (you might remember I mentioned) I was pretty good at picking up most instruments and making some sense out of them. After a few years strumming guitars and blowing trumpets I discovered an elegant piece of furniture which sat quietly in the corner of our lounge room. Over time she gently beckoned me to her, until eventually I gave in to her seductions. It was the family piano.

I took off. By the end of year 10 I'd written over a hundred original songs, mostly all about girls and love, breaking free and getting smashed, whatever was in my teenage mind. It was sort of like my diary. A musical diary. I'd grown up listening to Billy Joel and Elton John records that Mum and Dad bought, they were my idols. Being a country town lad I never really got exposed to any of the loud head-banging stuff; I was a piano man! I dreamt of one day being discovered like Billy Joel in a piano bar somewhere, my obvious talent *finally* being uncovered, rocketing me to stardom to make gold records, have girls scream for me on stage (that was the really important bit) and become a famous singer/songwriter dancing out my latest pop hits on Saturday morning MTV or Rage. What was so unrealistic in that, right?

More than just a crazy fantasy though, this dream would remain within me and become part of what would eventually drive my whole life. Music would become my passion.

In Yr 11 & 12 I went to boarding school in Sydney where I actually got my mind off girls for a while and did some study. I bet my parents were relieved! It was good for me anyway to get out of my small town and experience life in a different way. Overall, I didn't really like it; I was out of my comfort zone. No longer was I leader of the 'Hilux Hooligans'- I was a new kid on the block.

An all-boys school can be very competitive, and if you

weren't good at sport, you weren't in the popular group. I found a great group of mates and I hung out with them, but I definitely still tried to fit in with the 'new system'. If you wanted to be somebody here then you tried out for the First XV Rugby team. To be in the Firsts Rugby, Cricket or Rowing was an esteemed position. I do not hesitate to say that at this school, 'football was God.' Even the bullying thing came up again – man, I thought I was past this! Basically I was a new boy, I didn't fit in and I didn't really want to, even though I desperately tried. It seems that God had other plans in store for me.

It was a trial game for the Firsts Rugby In Yr 11. The ball was passed out to me when the cover defence came sweeping across like a tidal wave, crunching in a heap on top of me and bringing a loud 'cracking' sound from my jaw. The pain was so bad that night in the dining hall that it killed me trying to eat just one pea. It was broken. Turns out I have to get my jaw wired, which means I look like a metal detector, have really bad breath and have to drink all my meals through a straw. But what was worse it took me out for the entire footy season.

Good one God. I was trying to fit in here, what are You doing?

I think He knew. The very next year, trial game again, beginning of the season, a chance to be 'normal'. I get tackled around the knees; 'Crack!' Now for the rest of THAT season I'm in a wheelchair and crutches with a broken knee. Again, great sense of humour, God, good onya. Exactly where is this going?

Now each year while all my friends did footy training after school, I would wander into the music rooms, shut the door on boarding school life and play the piano. LOUD. I wrote song after song after song, one which I called 'Country Union Girls,' a pay-out on the dressed up girls in denim and pearls who used to come to our school to watch their boyfriends play 'Ra Ra' (as Rugby Union is called).

One day my piano teacher teed me up to play Country Union Girls in front of the whole school at assembly. Now the

sort of music one plays at assembly is DIGNIFIED, nothing eccentric please.

The Headmaster and Coordinators were all seated this day in dignified pose onstage as I took my seat at the grand piano.

Silence.

Then out it came. The Coonamble country boy was let loose and that baby grand never knew what hit it! The second I slid my thumb down the keyboard for the last rock'n roll slide and charged off the stage the hall erupted in applause. I hadn't felt this tall in a while. The Headmaster was shaking his head as I walked past him, clapping along with the rest of the hall full of boys. So I *had* meaning to my life and it wasn't playing football for some dumb school! I was *good* at something that no one else could do and the sound of that crowd proved it.

I decided that day that I liked being me. My identity began to wrap itself even tighter around the dreams I hoped would one day come true. Music was my path to acceptance. It was everything.

Occasionally Jesus stuck His head into my door for a catch-up chat (as you do). School put on more of these 'retreat' things where we all went away for a weekend camp, talked about life, took our masks down and for a brief moment in time were real with each other. (As soon as we got back to school of course things went back to normal.)

On one of these camps though I remember drawing a picture of me and God. He had his arm around me like a mate would; one eye closed and the other eye keeping a watch on me, half mouth smiling, the other half smirking. It was as if He was shaking His head at me saying; "Keady, Keady, you're a worry. But I love ya!"



Me and Jesus were mates. Sometimes instead of studying I'd write these 'letters to myself' to philosophise on life, vent frustrations, record weird dreams, anything really. They used to call me '*The Old Man*' due to my philosophising. Almost without fail though each time I journalled the words would start to address someone else (swearing freely throughout) and then change again as if this person were now answering me back with the truth behind each situation. Weird. I thought I was just 'writing letters to myself', talking to my conscience or 'alter ego' or something. Little did I know I had begun to pray! I was talking to God, and He was talking back to me. The communication lines were open.

It was now make or break. Yr 12 finished and I had to decide WHAT TO DO WITH THE REST OF MY LIFE. This is where some friend of your mums comes up to you in Year 12 with that concerned-but-interested look and drops ‘the line’;

“SO - what are YOU going to be doing with your life now?”

When you do confirm that what she’s heard is true (that you want to become a musician) you’d get that slow, ‘trying-to-understand-why-on-earth’ nod of the head;

“Riiiiight...Okaaay...”

Being a muso means you make as much money as an actor: none!

Many of my classmates were going to study commerce or law or science at a big popular university in the city together, with the expectation of their parents right behind them. It’s interesting - a few years later they’d already changed courses and were saying to me ‘Good on you for pursuing what you love to do – I wish I had’.

Now was the time I either went for my dreams or chucked them. With the encouragement and support of my Mum and Dad I went for them. I got into a contemporary ‘jazz/rock’ university in Lismore up on the North Coast, where I began three years of study in music. Finally, I was going to be the ‘Billy Joel that got discovered’!

Or so I thought.



At Coonamble High (Centre) with ‘The Hilux Hooligans.’