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ANATOMY  
*of a* SECRET

ONE MAN'S  
SEARCH *for* JUSTICE



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*To those who have not survived; to their brothers, sisters, parents  
and partners who have grieved, sometimes not knowing why.*

*To those who have survived; and their families, past, present and  
future, who all suffer from those wounds that continue to bleed.*

## Prologue

Staring out at the featureless landscape of tufted, white clouds far below, the 'Kyrie and Gloria' by the Italian Renaissance composer Lassus on my iPod had taken me into a dreamlike, separate-from-the-world state. A pressure started building in my chest, a balloon being inflated around my heart. Music sometimes makes me cry, especially religious choral music. But this was different, not joyous. Tears began to trickle down my cheeks. Embarrassed, I pretended to blow my nose. The crying quickly turned to sobbing. I tried coughing to mask it. The deep, racking sobs began pulsing up from my belly with such startling and increasing ferocity it was as though, with my whole body shaking, I was being drawn down into their dark depths. I could not stifle them. I turned to the window to hide my face. It's difficult concealing convulsive sobbing in a cramped plane. My wife, Louise, gently touched my arm.

'What is it?' she whispered.

I shook my head. The wrenching, bottomless sobs finally overtook my whole body. Tears streamed down my cheeks, dripping off my chin, saturating my shirt and jeans. I let go of trying to hide them and, in despair, surrendered. I pressed my forehead against the window, covered my face and unashamedly let myself sob. Minutes passed in tortured bewilderment. When it subsided, and the tears finally dried, there was nothing left. I felt emptied of all substance. Salt residue crackled as it dried on my cheeks.

I had no idea what had just happened.

It was 2004. I was fifty-two. I had endured years of sudden and terrifying rages from an unknowable, volcanic source and,

every few months, awoke exhausted from the same unresolvable nightmare:

‘There is a terrible war all around me. It has apparently been raging unabated for years. I’m on my own, being hunted and shot at. The shooting is incessant. Whatever side it is I’m on is in a state of perpetual defeat. I scramble terrified across fields devastated by the fighting, hiding behind mounds of earth, diving down into bomb craters, crawling along behind shattered brick walls. It’s all I can do to avoid being hit by the sprays of bullets whistling past. I can’t see anyone else on my side. I’m on my own. Neither can I see who’s doing the shooting. This unseen enemy pursues me relentlessly across these ravaged landscapes. I’m mute. I can’t shout or call for help.’

After a lifetime of skirting the repercussions of sexual abuse, of raging against everyone except the perpetrator and the Catholic Church, of blaming everyone and everything but him, a new, rising tide surged into my life. It was pervasive, unpredictable and overwhelming: the realisation that I was not okay.

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### Childhood

1951–1961

My first breath, in December 1951, was in the hands of the Catholic Church. I'd been delivered by a midwife nun at the St John of God Hospital in Northam, a large country town north-east of Perth. I was wiped clean, swaddled and put in the cot where, two years earlier, Joe had been delivered by the same nun. 'This one is different from the first,' she'd told my mother.

We lived in Goomalling, thirty miles north-east of Northam, where my father had grown up and had returned as a married man to be the postmaster. Our home was half a house attached to the back of the post office. My childhood there had the imprint of life in a quiet country town, stencilled with the familiar images of open skies and ranging gum trees, the silence at night, and then in the morning the smells of the dew, of kerosene splashed on the woodchips in the Metters stove, of fresh bread wrapped in butcher's paper. I stood on a chair at the kitchen sink and watched out the window as the milkman pulled up in his horse and chariot, ladling milk from a churn into a billy can, the chariot bucking as he leaped off. The horse turned its head and watched him as he ran to the window and poured the milk into a cream-and-green enamelled saucepan perched on the sill. 'Morning, champ,' he said. The milk frothed in the saucepan and my mother put it on the stove to heat it.

In the afternoons, Joe and I sat on top of the mail bags as the postal clerk wheeled the mail cart to the station. The afternoon sun flashed through the dangling branches of the pepper trees in front of the railway cottages, the bitter-smelling pink

peppercorns crackling as they were squashed under the rubber tyres of the cart.

A door from our half-house opened into the telephone exchange inside the post office. I often stood in the doorway breathing in those post-office smells: waxed linoleum, canvas mail bags, string, ink and teleprinter oil. Jean, the telephonist, worked the switchboard, snapping the cables out and clicking them into the rows of holes. She'd once let me sit on her knee, but her wool skirt itched my legs.

There was a wide gate in the gravel driveway beside the post office where the telephone linesmen drove through in their old truck. The driveway dipped in the middle so there was a gap under the gate, and where Joe began making his escapes. Slithering along the gravel, he'd cross the main street to the railway station where there was a hive of activity to engage him. Once, aged six, he was found sitting on a tractor on the back of an open wagon. Another time, the guard found him in a carriage as the train was leaving the station. Enticed to follow him once, I got stuck midway under the gate. A swarm of ants crawled across my face and I screamed for my mother.

Joe's adventures have been told and retold, how he challenged our parents with what they called his wilfulness. His highly inquisitive mind meant he was forever outpacing their authoritarian, but novice, attempts to curb his imaginative adventures.

There were some, though, who reveled in his spirit. Uncle Paddy and Aunty Grace were Irish immigrants who had settled in Goomalling. My father arranged for them to buy his parents' old cottage on the edge of town, his parents having moved to the city in their old age. Paddy and Grace became a natural extension of our family and their six children our surrogate cousins. Uncle Paddy's solid Irish smile and laughing, twinkling, blue-eyed winks tempered our father's frustrations. Aunty Grace's earthy

wisdom and motherly fussing, as well as her cakes and scones, eased our mother's anxieties. They were the warmest, wisest people on earth, and they celebrated Joe's spirit.

I was an observer, and watched and marvelled at this world around; perhaps because Joe's energy consumed everyone's attention, I was labelled the quiet, compliant one. This difference in our natures, foreshadowed by the midwife nun, played out throughout our childhoods and into adulthood.

Another brother, Terry, was born in 1954. I remember him standing in the safe-cot in the corner of our bedroom. Joe, notoriously, had managed to escape from it, but Terry was just standing quietly, his fingers pressed against the repaired flywire.

In 1956, we moved to Perth when my father arranged a transfer as postmaster to Mosman Park. My mother's parents were elderly, and she wanted to live closer to them as they needed care. As well, our parents wanted us to have access to a good education without being consigned to a boarding school. On my birthday in December that year, the doorbell rang at my mother's parents' house where we were staying, and I was handed a telegram. Uncle Paddy and Auntie Grace's birthday wishes were my first memory of being celebrated for myself, acknowledged separately from big brother Joe.

We soon moved to a rented house, not far away on Stirling Highway, two hundred yards up the hill from the Catholic church. It was to be our home for the next eight years. Joe and I started school at the Church primary school that occupied two rooms at the back of the hall adjacent to the church. The school was run by the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary – fierce apparitions in voluminous black habits tied off with oversized rosary beads that dangled down the folds of their habits. Stiff white bibs, pushed up under their chins, white wimples, and heavy black veils pinched and framed the stern

portholes of their faces. They may have been gentle souls, but their appearance emanated the direst of devilish warnings. Their teaching followed suit. I was so afraid of going to Hell that after one particular day of fearful finger-waving, I couldn't cross the highway alone after school in case I was knocked over and killed. I stood opposite our house and waved frantically for my mother to rescue me.

After a three-year gap in her child-bearing, two more brothers were born in quick succession. Paddy and Dom became known as the 'little ones'. In one scene, I am standing on a chair at the kitchen sink, counting out half-moons of Lactogen with a spoon, arranging the soft white domes in a pattern on a large white plate so our mother could check their number. Warm water was measured in a glass jug, into which she tipped the plate of half-moons and stirred until it frothed. She filled the babies' bottles, sprinkling the liquid onto her wrist to check the temperature.

I do not remember my father being part of these rituals. Mum ran the household – shopping, cooking, cleaning, sewing our clothes, managing the finances and reading our bedtime stories. I would cuddle up to her, lost in faraway European Catholic lands, listening to the lyrical tales of the heroic and noble saints, like St Francis of Assisi and his friends the animals, or St Teresa the 'Little Flower', or the children at Lourdes. Catching a cold had some benefits. She would tuck me into her double bed, warm up camphorated oil and rub it in gentle circles on my back and chest to ease the congestion. I drifted off to sleep following the geometric patterns of light travelling across the walls of the room, as the headlights of cars on the highway outside shone through the cut-glass leadlight windows.

We were not poor, but neither were we well off. Mum kept meticulous account of every penny, entering the family finances in a large ledger, the numbered columns written in beautiful



copperplate. The need to scrimp and save week to week was a constant in family conversations, as was the need to look after what we already had.

‘If you boys don’t stop rocking on these chairs, don’t think they’ll be replaced. You’ll be sitting on packing cases!’ Dad never let up. I suppose we never did either.

His realm was outside. He generously played sport with us when he got home from work. The wide verge, glossy green with Guildford grass, was a football oval in winter. In summer, we played cricket and he bowled to us for hours, chastising us for using cross-bats, miming the correct stroke as he growled his kindly growl. He had been a good sportsman in his youth, but as a parent and a husband, he mostly seemed to have an eye for mistakes. Good shots were met with silence. But he was there, outside with us, every day. And we loved it.

He built a sandpit from old railway sleepers dragged up from the side of the railway line at the bottom of the hill. We drove to the nearby beach and filled our rubbish bin with beach sand and, with it balanced precariously in the boot of our FJ Holden, brought it back to fill the sandpit. In this new world, my brothers and I built towns and villages out of twigs and cardboard, then demolished them to make way for the high-rise buildings we saw springing up in the city.

There were few rules and few constraints outside the house. Joe was the creator and director of all our play. We all willingly fell under his spell and travelled with him in his imagination. He cobbled together fruit boxes and packing crates from the nearby telephone exchange to make yachts in which we circumnavigated the globe. On Boxing Day, we competed in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. Old sheets, purloined from the linen cupboard, were hoisted onto broom handles and held tightly against the Roaring Forties with nappy pins. We always went to see Bullens

or Wirths circus when they came to Perth. Afterwards, Joe rigged up tents on the verge, the same old sheets stretched over broom handles again, and toy animals paraded at the entrance. Mr Church, our elderly, widowed neighbour, was so impressed with Joe's reconstruction, he painted a 'WIRTHS' sign to fix to the big top. I was disappointed he chose Wirths because I preferred Bullens. Their tent was bigger, and they had more lions.

During the Rome Olympics in 1960, he co-opted all the neighbourhood kids and organised our own Games. There were high jumps, long jumps and sprints on the wide street verge, the hundred yards marked with chalk on the footpath. We threw large rocks in the shot-put and pie tins in the discus. But the main event was the javelin throw and as it turned out, a swift culmination of the Games.

Joe had fashioned a javelin from a three-foot length of metal rod, meticulously filing its tip toothpick-fine. It needed testing. Running across the verge and in through the side gate, he swept past the swarm of expectant kids and hurled the lethal dart towards the red corrugated iron water tank. We all gasped as it disappeared, leaving only a short shank protruding at right angles through the corrugations. No-one breathed. Nothing happened. The javelin had formed a perfect seal. Rather unwisely, he quickly removed the evidence. A jet of water three yards long chased him back up the pathway. Everyone ran. It pissed for hours until the water level reached the hole. Every time it rained, water trickled out until one day, when Uncle Paddy came to visit, he wound a rag around a dolly peg and rammed it in the hole. For years, water dribbled down the corrugations, a slimy, green, mossy delta.

Play in the holidays was a privilege granted after household jobs were done. As well as being a practical help, there was a moral tone to these duties. Making your bed was mandatory, but it came with a codicil: Air it first! Hospital corners! Turn

the pillow! Then there was a choice: vacuuming, dusting or the dishes. I chose a job that was independent of anyone else having to finish an earlier task. Joe took forever, his head already in the next adventure, procrastinating until desperation delivered a half-hearted job. Avoid following him. Terry drifted along in his own, sweet universe. Avoid following him.

Summer holiday mornings were spent lazing and swimming at Cottesloe beach, orbiting around our pink-and-white umbrella under which our mother sat and read. In the afternoons, we had an enforced rest, lying on our beds reading comics until it was cool enough to venture outside again. We then roamed the neighbourhood unchecked until we heard Mum's 'come-home-now-for-dinner' whistle at five-thirty. She could really whistle. One of the other mothers blew an umpire's whistle, leaning out her dining room window at five o'clock on the dot. I felt sorry for those kids, not only that they had to go home early, but also that their mother couldn't whistle with her lips like ours did.

We mucked around in neighbours' gardens and shade houses or had treasure islands in unkempt vacant lots. Miss Briggs's ancient loquat tree was a good climb, and we winced eating the sour fruit just to get to the slimy pips for pip-spitting contests. Mr Redding's backyard was next to the Seventh-day Adventist church further down our street. If you crouched in the straw in his chook pen and peeped through the gaps in the picket fence, you could catch a glimpse of the back of their church. That was the nearest we dared go. There was a reason.

Sister Petra in the Year One and Two classroom had taught us that unless you were a baptised Catholic, and in a State of Grace, you couldn't get into Heaven. We were the lucky ones, belonging to the one true Church, and although we were told we were the only ones who *could* get into Heaven, there still seemed to be a hierarchy of other religions jostling for no good reason. There

were Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Methodists. The list was long and, when they were talked about, it was in hushed tones, as though the mere utterance of their names might taint our purity.

At the very bottom of the religious hierarchy, in my assessment, were the Seventh-day Adventists. They worshipped on Saturdays. You couldn't possibly be a real religion unless you went to church on Sundays like everyone else. Their church building, which looked more like a hall than a Gothic stone church, cemented the rationale for my disdain. They were so different they became the embodiment of 'other', the hook on which we could hang our fears, and Mr Redding's chook pen was the last frontier.

Despite the 'official line' on other religions, we still played with kids in the street no matter what religion they belonged to. I noticed that there were no paintings of Jesus and His Sacred Heart on the walls of the Methodist children's house three doors down, no holy pictures or statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary like in our lounge room. Though there was a black-and-white photo of their mother assembled with a group of men in suits. She was dressed in a neat, tightly buttoned, coarse fabric dress-suit. The inscription under the photograph read, 'Moderators of the Methodist Church'. I had unquestioningly absorbed the patriarchal structure of our Catholic Church, so I struggled with this conundrum: she was a generous, caring and loving mother like ours, but also a leader in her Church, a brand that lacked legitimacy. When their family left for church on Sunday mornings, I saw she wore a solid brown woollen skirt and matching jacket. I was sure it was the one in the photograph. The colour brown thus came to represent Methodism. In country towns, Methodist churches were always brown-painted, weatherboard buildings, not the grand, brick-and-stone edifices of *our* churches. As well,

brown seemed a joyless sort of colour, certainly not one that could get you into Heaven. Somehow this justified the Methodists being close to the bottom of the list.

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On Sunday afternoons, Dad always took my brothers and me for a drive, leaving Mum in peace. Squashing into the FJ, we set off across the city, sometimes to visit aunts and uncles, and sometimes to watch the marching-girl parades in East Perth. The brightly coloured uniforms of the girls swirled and flapped as they precision marched under the watchful eyes of usually older men. Very occasionally we visited the Presentation Sisters in their convent, up on the hill in Mosman Park. The convent – ominous, heavy-doored, dark-timbered and solemn – was at the top of a long drive. Inside, unknowable, black-cloaked sisters glided in and out of doorways and corridors, their rosary beads clacking softly against their habits. My father would have tea with Sister This or Sister That. They offered each of us a Mills and Ware cream biscuit off a plate with a silver bow handle. We knew to take just one.

Mostly though, these Sunday drives took us somewhere we could adventure. The inactivity in the harbour at Fremantle on Sundays meant we could play unhindered on the bitumen-coated, timber-planked wharves. We pushed little cargo trolleys around, coupling them together to make trains, giving each other rides, backwards and forwards between the bollards and the timber goods sheds. Above us, high-sided, black-painted ships, their hulls stitched with rivets and rust, leaned in and out with the swells, the ratguards straddling the hawsers easing up and down with the sagging and tightening of the ropes, creaking in rhythm with the sea. Names and ports of registration named far-off countries where we had sailed in our packing-case boats.

Impassive, foreign seamen fished silently off the sterns, cigarettes dangling from their lips, their lines disappearing into the bottomless, green water wobbling below.

When television came to Perth in 1959, Dad took us older boys down to the shopping centre after dinner to watch television in the window of the electrical goods store. Kids sat in their pyjamas on the footpath, their parents huddling behind in a motley arc. The latest television – a Healing or a Kriesler or an HMV with thin, tapered legs – straddled the toasters and kettles and radios in the window. Faraway voices from the screen echoed down from a tinny speaker hung with wire on the underside of the awning.

Joe, the relentless innovator and trendsetter, made a television set out of a Watsonia butter box, about the right size and shape for a small HMV. He copied the Channel Seven black-and-white test pattern and sticky-taped it behind an oval hole he'd cut in the base of the box. Buttons became knobs, stuck in a row under the screen. He made a television aerial with two broomsticks and rows of dowels nailed at right angles to form the bars. He painted it silver with stove paint and, climbing up onto the roof, wired it to the chimney as was the fashion. He ran a length of string down the chimney, across the lounge room floor and into the back of the butter box. We were the first in our street to get a TV! The neighbourhood kids came and sat on the sofa and the floor, and we all stared at the test pattern. The next morning, I saw people in the buses crawling up the hill past our house pointing at our aerial and laughing. The humiliation!

Sunday afternoon drives then became a hunt to count television aerials. 'Drive to Dalkeith,' we shouted, 'where all the rich people live.' We kept a tally, noting the steadily increasing numbers week to week, then rushing inside when we got home to be the first to tell Mum this week's score.

At Christmastime, preparations were a collaborative joy. Decorations packed away in a cardboard box were retrieved and spilled out onto the floor, the familiar red Chinese lanterns, crepe paper balls with honeycomb centres and silver tinsel coming to life again. Joe, standing on a stool, hung the decorations in the doorways and from the light shades, then looped streamers under the picture rails, encircling the lounge room and the dining room and the hallway.

The lounge room fireplace, empty and unused all year, was transformed into the Bethlehem stable. Yellow summer grass from the verge was the stable's straw floor, and tendrils of ivy from Miss Briggs's garden circled the limestone rocks we collected to make the grotto. Finally, a shoebox containing the nativity set that languished all year at the bottom of our parents' wardrobe, was lovingly opened and the plaster-cast figures set down on the hearth. Joe arranged the statues around the empty manger, with the animals behind and the shepherds in front. Mary, kneeling adoringly and hands clasped in prayer, was placed on one side of the manger while Joseph, holding his staff, head inclined downwards looking perplexed, was stood on the other side. Finally, the Angel of the Lord was hung from wire over the fireplace arch. The baby Jesus was safely swaddled in cotton wool in the china cabinet drawer until Christmas morning.

We bought our Christmas tree from the YMCA stall at Derm Ryan's Mobil Garage down the hill. The final selection, always a sullen compromise, never seemed to meet Joe's expectations. The misshapen tree was stuffed onto the backseat of the FJ, and we drove home crammed into the front seat. The tree was given pride of place next to the Bethlehem grotto. Last year's ornaments were tipped out of another shoebox, and Joe hung them from the tips of the branches. The baubled tree and the smell of pine heralded Christmas at last.

At Midnight Mass, candles and dim lights gave the church an other-worldly, ethereal glow. The side entrance was closed off and converted into a stable, a small star with a globe in it dangled from the architrave above. Mary, calm and adoring, and Joseph, understandably worried, stared down at the baby-less manger. A cow and the donkey with a chipped ear knelt quietly behind, while the shepherds, heads also inclined in adoration, clustered along the edge of the pews so close I could touch them, their sheep safely grazing by their sides. At the end of Mass, escorted by the altar boys, old Father Kearnan carried the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed him in the manger. We walked home in the dark, the streetlights having gone off at ten minutes past one.

After opening presents in the morning, we had the once-a-year roast chicken and vegies for Christmas dinner, followed by pudding drizzled with custard. The pudding came in a Mills and Ware tin, which was boiled on the stove for hours. We all dissected our portion until we excitedly claimed a threepence. I marvelled that Mills and Ware could get just one threepence so perfectly into everyone's slice, year after year. Dad was always the last to find his. We all leaned over the table, shouting and pointing at lumps of pudding in his bowl, and he groaned as each morsel produced nothing. Then, always with the last mouthful, he coughed and gagged and spluttered and, with a look of horror, pulled a button from his cheek. Every year, he got the button. The mystery persisted. How did Mills and Ware do it? He carried on gagging, and we laughed until Mum, exasperated, finally said, 'That's enough now. Stop acting the goat.' He was a good clown, readily self-deprecating, and he revelled in being the centre of attention.

Arguments between my brothers were called squabbles, but those between Joe and I morphed into hostilities over time. He



always had the upper hand in a dispute, but once, having pushed me beyond my limit, I chased him through the house and flung a fork at him. He slammed the feature-leadlight lounge room door behind him and the fork shattered an ornate pane. Mum rushed to sweep up the splinters, yelling at me, 'You'll murder someone one day!' I was shocked that that was what my rage would lead to: Hell. Anger had long been forbidden at home, but this propelled it to a new level of prohibition.

When Uncle Paddy, Aunty Grace and the six 'cousins' came down from Goomalling, they stayed with or near us in Cottesloe. It meant our sailing journeys and adventures in the backyard became even greater travel odysseys, with full crews of willing sailors. It also meant there were enough of us to form a congregation for Mass. The chest of drawers, now with a good sheet as an altar cloth, was adorned with geraniums clustered in Vegemite glasses. Joe donned our mother's faded-green boarding school pinafore for his vestments, green symbolising it was a Pentecost season, which I found disappointing as I preferred the red vestments of the martyrs' feast days. I stood solemnly to one side as the altar boy, handing Joe the water and raspberry cordial, the nearest thing to altar wine, and the pieces of bread cut into circles for Hosts. My other brothers and the cousins knelt in rows on the floor. Any giggles drew a priestly reprimand from Father Joe. But once Margie, the eldest cousin, started up, I couldn't help myself and we all doubled over in stitches.

We often went up to Goomalling to stay with them in the holidays. Their corrugated iron cottage, in a paddock by a creek on the edge of town, rekindled the innocence and simplicity of my first five years of life in the town. The kitchen became a furnace as the wood stove was stoked and Aunty Grace rolled out scone dough on the deal table. We took it in turns to stamp out the circles with an overturned glass so that we could hear the

sucking *sloooook* as it came free from the dough. Later, she would call us, ‘Will ye all come now for a scoan?’ We ran and sat on the back steps, licking the smattering of jam in the middle of the delicious, hot scones.

In winter, we dammed their creek, and when it was full, sailed empty Lux or Trix detergent bottles as ocean liners. We caught tadpoles by the hundreds and crammed them into tall jars and took them up to the laundry, watching each day for their legs to grow as they lazily wriggled in their watery prison. When the dam wall inevitably burst, we followed the torrent down the meandering sandy bed as it headed towards the main road. We stopped at the bridge. On the other side was the Aboriginal reserve and we knew we were not to go there. In spring, we hiked up to the old racetrack to collect everlastings, tying them in bunches and hanging them upside down to dry in the laundry.

When a chook got too old to lay, Uncle Paddy would hold it on a block of wood and the axe dropped swiftly and cleanly. Once, the chook took off headless and ran amok around the pen, blood spurting from its severed neck, spraying a neat stripe of red across my knees. Uncle Paddy cursed the ‘flamin’ thing’ and chased the flailing bird until he caught it by the legs. We followed him, exhilarated and terrified, as he strode to the laundry where Aunty Grace dropped the limp, white shape into the copper full of boiling water. After a few minutes, she presented it to us for plucking.

In their tiny lounge room at night, we huddled on the floor in our pyjamas and said the rosary. The hurricane lamp’s wavering, yellow-tongued flame cast wobbling shadows on the pressed tin walls as flames crackled in the fireplace, leaping about the prehistoric shapes of mallee roots. After the rosary, Uncle Paddy told stories about Ireland, about the hurling and the football, and the Blarney, and the bridge where he met Aunty Grace. He was

a wonderful storyteller and a very fair man. The sweet smell of the hurricane lamp and their lilting Irish voices lulled us ready for bed. The two girls, Margie and Jess, had their own room, but their four boys and us 'Perthies' all squashed head-to-toe in the cramped, freezing sleep-out.