

THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Valentine was not the sort of person I expected that day. As visiting Hospital Chaplain, Accident & Emergency contacted me about a fellow picked up wandering in a dazed condition along the railway tracks.

I found him sitting, Buddha-like, on a bench at the back of the ambulance bay.

“Valentine? Mind if I have a seat?” He attempted to shuffle along without uncrossing his legs. His black track pants snagged on the rough plank. No shoes - the sole of the foot facing me was thickly calloused. He remained slumped over, elbows resting on his knees, dirty hands clenched in his lap. Matted dreadlocks hung across a bearded face.

I sat and waited. An odour of stale spirits and bodily secretions wafted in my direction.

“At least, it’s quiet in here,” I ventured.

A grunt. “Not as quiet as home.”

“Oh? Where’s home then?”

Valentine raised his head - only to check out who was asking, I guessed. I reached over to shake his hand.

“Hello, I’m Reverend Martin.” He did not return the gesture.

Peering from blood-shot eyes, his gaze was expressionless, emotionless, soulless... He grunted again and shrugged a what-the-heck kind of resignation.

“I live under Bloomfield Bridge ... me and me dog...”

I could see his shoulder-blades twitch nervous ripples in his thin jumper. A deep moan seeped through his whiskers as Valentine began to rock forward and back - forward and back... The motion seemed to soothe his pain. He stopped and looked directly into my eyes.

“Me dog got totalled by a truck, yesterdee.” We sat for some time... no words seemed sufficient.

Eventually, he accepted the offer of a cup of coffee at the hospital kiosk. A few syllables and four full mugs later, the shopkeeper urged us out the door so she could close for the day.

The bridge Valentine called home was on the outskirts of town, not far from the convict-built sandstone church where I ministered. I drove him home, via the op shop, to collect some blankets. (On cold nights, his faithful kelpie had been his main source of warmth.)

Over the next few months, I would drop in to leave food my wife baked, sometimes to chat or just to sit with him on the river bank absorbed in the sounds and light patterns played across the water by insects, frogs, water hens, cormorants, ubiquitous ducks...

“This is my church,” Valentine once said, giving me a shy, sideways glance.

As his trust grew, Valentine, the man, slowly emerged. He came off a cattle station further west. Good family - torn apart by drought and tragedy. After matriculating, he took a gap year to help his dad on the farm. Loved the land, he told me, and planned to study Agricultural Science.

But, that year the bank foreclosed on the property and his father suicided.

His mother and younger brother moved to live with relatives in the city. Valentine took up a neighbour's offer but it didn't work out – that cattleman was struggling, too. For several years, he drifted from job to casual job, unable to reconcile his bitterness at the hand fate had dealt. He became reliant on alcohol to drown his grief and disconnection. His dog was his one undemanding constant.

Eventually, Valentine and 'Duchess' built a cardboard shanti in a dry spot under the bridge. They survived on scavenged scraps, the occasional rabbit or fish and charity.

Mine was a large parish including not only the prosperous township but surrounding small villages and several large rural properties. The congregation included business folk, civic leaders and generations of wealthy farming families - all strictly polished shoes, suit-and-tie, matching hat-and-handbag church-goers, as tradition expected in the 1960's.

In April, the year after I first met Valentine, I planned grand Easter celebrations unaware the Almighty had prepared a script that did not need words.

On resurrection Sunday, morning light streamed its stained-glass colours across the rows of heads and ladies' hats. It was gratifying to see every seat occupied. As notes of the organist's opening introit swelled with reedy joy, a shadow crossed the archway under the front portico.

Without hesitation, the shadow - now a silhouette - walked the carpet towards the rostrum and sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of me. It was Valentine – dreadlocks, shoeless and smelly. Several women gasped and I noticed a deacon about to step out of his pew, jaw and eyes set hard.

What happened next still moves me.

From the front row, the Town Mayor rose to his feet, walked over and, too, sat down cross-legged beside Valentine. They remained there, deltoid to deltoid, for the entire service.

I have little memory of my meticulously prepared sermon that day. I think it was all said before I started preaching.

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800 words