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Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

Since the day after my arrival, I had been attending classes in Form 1. I was placed according to my age. No one asked my father what lessons I had done to date, or found out that I had received only a little over four years of schooling in the camp. Strictly speaking, I should have been put back two years. I badly needed to learn decimals and fractions in Maths, and a quite sophisticated list of English words.

There was no remedial education at that time. The teaching resources were far too stretched: too few teachers, too few books. Having to learn by trial and error, rather than through a pedagogically structured program meant that I picked up some unfortunate ways of learning, which were later difficult to undo. Later on, my cognitive patterns were to confuse even trained experts. In the later years of my schooling, my father tried to redirect the obstinate, fundamentalist direction I had chosen for my future. I felt I had chosen my path from everything rich and rare in religion that my convent education offered. His life I judged as being banal.

With the day students, we sat in twin wooden desks in rows. We boarders did not, however, mix socially with the day students. Our teacher, Sister Josepha, was a large woman with a square frame and a rugged face containing large, uneven teeth. These were used to great effect in correctly modelling French pronunciation. Although of Irish birth, Sister Josepha had been educated for a while in Belgium, so we assumed her parents were 'well off'. She had some understanding of what it is to be a foreigner, but she struggled to control her large class of two forms in one room. So after our honeymoon was over, I was as much the victim of her ruler across my knuckles or my head as anyone else.

I was not so much disturbed by her periodic anger as embarrassed on her behalf. In summer it was unpleasant to be in a sweaty class stinking of rotting fish, which it took until the following year to discover had to do with menstruation. Given her age, I now assume that Sister Josepha's intemperance was due to menopause. It must have been insufferable for her if she shared the acute sense of smell I had inherited from my mother.

These were the days before commercially available sanitary pads; and tampons were unheard of. We young women were a restless bunch. The discomfort of not knowing whether one was 'fish or fowl' was summed up by this saying which my mother often repeated. It so aptly describes the uncertainties and agonies of the threshold of adolescence.

I was safeguarded in my ignorance of the language of the classroom by the routines that were followed. The first thing I learned to do in class was to rule up the pages of my exercise books with margins, and to place above them in large print the abbreviation AM+DG (*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*: All for the Greater Glory of God). Everything we did, thought and planned was subject to this command. Secular life was offered up to an invisible divinity and had a place in the divine scheme of things.

Classroom activity was predictable, and there was much rote learning. Both students and teachers read aloud in class and discussed set texts. The English language came to me in little pieces. Rhyming couplets from Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* were among the earliest passages I remember, but most of the prose of *The Talisman*, by Sir Walter Scott, D.K. Broster's *The Flight of the Heron*, Mrs Aeneas Gunn's *The Little Black Princess*, and Frank Dalby Davison's *Mansby*, went completely over my head.

These texts were set by the Victorian Education Department curriculum, which also provided each of us with a monthly *School Paper* containing short illustrated stories, homilies, poems and puzzles.

A few times Sister Josepha's anger with the aid of a ruler was instrumental in releasing those awful nosebleeds to which I was susceptible. Mother took my nosebleeds for granted. Both she and her mother had suffered from them and outgrown the condition at about twenty. It did not occur to me that the vigorous ear cuffs German children were given at that time by their fathers may have contributed to my nasal weakness.

My nosebleeds were especially bad. The medical cause was given as a weak capillary in one nostril. The problem could be cured, we were told, by cauterisation. My parents preferred to let me 'outgrow the condition'. My mother's patience with washing out blood-stained clothes was more than human. She also produced the plausible argument, perhaps based on traditional folk medicine, that nature's blood-letting held at bay much worse disorders, such as violent headaches.

When one of my dreadful nosebleeds suddenly spurted forth in class, I was rushed down to the school foyer and laid on the cold concrete floor. A wet cloth was placed on my forehead and the school gate's enormous iron key placed at the back of my neck to cool the blood. The horrid red flood ran down my throat uncomfortably, disgustingly, for a long time until, it seemed, I had run out of blood.

My nose, disturbed by the slightest pressure to my head, was a cautionary prompt to Sister Josepha to aim for more cushioned parts of our anatomy. Hands, however, are also delicate instruments. Backsides were taboo. That left her with a dilemma. Teachers reigned unsupervised in their own classrooms in many schools of the time. Her lack of self-control was an exception to what usually went on in my six years at the Academy. Poor woman!

Sister Josepha and I nevertheless struck up a friendship in the room next to the chapel where she and Sister Bernadine were in charge of polishing the ecclesiastical brassware. I was a willing recruit. To amuse myself in chapel during boring Mass, I beheld with some pride the light playing on highly polished tall-stemmed brass vases filled with flowers grown in the nuns' own garden, which was out of bounds to us.

By the time winter arrived, the rhythm of each day had become predictable. I had chilblains on my hands due to the inadequate heating. Daily Mass was habitual if not obligatory: we attended because it was seen to be reinforcing our faith. Although we were supposed to have a choice in the matter, who dared to be so conspicuous as not to attend? It was easy for me to obey. That was the way I had been brought up.

Since everybody went to Mass, there was no discrimination between the pious and the less pious children in the convent. We were all treated fairly and kindly. Only exasperation with indolence, cheeky words or immoral behaviour brought on retribution. In that sense, obligation to conform also broke down discrimination. There was no carrot for being good; there

were no rewards for conforming. It was an unquestioning necessity, like the air we breathed. Thus, despite the hierarchical order of the Church and the champions of the faith, an egalitarian ethic was deeply ingrained in us. So too was the injunction not to judge others harshly. We had to learn to separate the people (whom God loved) from their actions (which might be sinful or reprehensible), to separate 'the dancer from the dance'.

As a young teenager, my alienation led me to become very serious. I began to reflect on the Christian ethic of fairness and consideration for others, as the humane ingredient in what was usually stereotyped by people like my father as Catholicism's arrogant and rule-bound intolerance. I regarded the humane aspects of my new religion as its most valuable gift, especially when I was able to contrast them with the grim ethos of life in the camp. Concern for others was a better recipe for human happiness than the cultivation of excellence in the arts and sport, or other competitive endeavours which brought honours but which isolated individuals even as they were praised.

Success was a trap, with its seductions, its vanities and its blunting of sensibility towards others less well placed. Although at junior high school I longed for the aesthetic appreciation, the stimulation of my intelligence and the challenge of the sporting programs pursued in the camp, I acknowledged that not everyone could enjoy these. To be cherished, on the other hand, was everyone's right and within everyone's reach, given a good community like the one that had taken me in. It provided a better recipe for community living. Of course, we were also obliged, as the New Testament suggested, to develop all our talents.

Boarding house and school programs were interleaved. Every morning after Mass we had a filling breakfast of porridge and white bread with jam. We took it in turns to serve at table, to help clear the dishes and to wash up and prepare the tables for the next meal. Then back up the stairs we went to complete our cleaning tasks in the washroom and dormitory. The boarding house was closed during school hours after we came down to the morning assembly in the playground. Thus, like the day students, we were not truly 'at home' during school hours. I'm sure most of us deeply missed our mothers, fathers and siblings.

Our midday meal consisted of hot food in a communal refectory. The smell of boiled cabbage and mashed potatoes, and sometimes of boiled corned beef, wafted through the building. My German nostrils

were not as affronted by these smells as were those of my Australian peers. They longed for grilled chops or a golden roast of chicken with baked vegetables for lunch at the family table after Sunday Mass.

After all the day students had gone home, we changed out of our uniforms for relaxation. But the place was bleak, uncomfortable, unheated. Warmth and joy came from the cultivation of friendship and faith; from scholastic successes; from queuing up to hit a ball with a friend around the one concrete tennis court; or by assembling players for an impromptu game of basketball on the two courts that made up the remainder of the playing space in front of the large covered shed, our rain shelter.

I was a competent goalkeeper. I had been putting on a brave face, to all outward appearances coping quite well with the challenge of not having a working language. Inwardly, I was becoming increasingly disenchanted at not achieving the all-round excellence on which, in the competitive camp school, my parents and teachers had commented. The longer I failed to attain even average skill in English, the more my general confidence dwindled. I longed for the athletics that required no language.

But athletics were not permitted at a school where female modesty was a higher priority than individual physical skill. I became increasingly inwardly lonely while continuing to smile and exhibit good manners. Quite early in my schooling at the convent my spiritual retreat from the world began.

I was to discover later that in state schools subject areas were regarded as specialisations and had teachers who taught them in different classes. There every student experienced a number of teachers. In our school we had one teacher almost exclusively for every class, except for the fringe subjects without academic status. Our teachers were expected to be skilled in all areas, flexible and exceptionally hard-working. Their lives of service were heroic. Their lessons were of less value than the commitment they demonstrated to any kind of task.

Our evening meal usually consisted of weak soup and a cold collation, with perhaps a dessert of preserved fruit and custard, or a hot pudding with jam sauce. After the camp food I thought the boarding school meals a novelty and quite delightful, despite the constant grumbings of my companions. They told me gloomily that the soup stock was made by swishing a piece of meat through it. The flavour of strong pepper and Worcestershire sauce in clear broth was its distinguishing feature.

I even wrote to my parents about the delicious meals. Sister Beatrice, who censored our mail, was amused when I tried to translate my letter home for her, conveying my enthusiasm for tinned peaches and simple boiled custard. At first I wrote to my parents on toilet paper because I did not know the word for paper. Even if I had, I would have been too shy to ask for some.

The nuns supplied us with envelopes and stamps for the letters they obliged us to send home. When they discovered my problem, we had a hearty laugh about my letters on paper from the loo. They were discreet enough not to tell any of the girls, because the joke would have haunted me forever. Nuns and girls were never close in any case. Religious regulations forbade it.

The homework hour was conducted upstairs before the evening meal at six.

It lingers in my memory as the *Heimweh* (home-sickness) hour. I associated it with the declining sun, the last light on the slate roof across the yard, and the sad fact that yet another day was disappearing forever. Weeks were slipping by fast, and I still did not know how to perform all my assigned duties. For some days I had sat during homework with my hands crossed, mute, expectant. This was the time of day when the boarders would practise their pianos and violins below. I felt a deep sense of longing for home, wherever that might be. I wanted to be with my parents, but even more than that, there was a longing for consolation of a greater kind.

The scales from the courtyard below, or a difficult passage in a Clementi, Czerni or Busoni exercise, repeated over and over by frustrated learners, were heard by this lonely listener as the chatter of musical voices. They were like so many conversations, vying for a place. This practice irritated others. To me, such endeavours were a solace and a reminder of the ways in which music transcends the languages that divide us from one another.

The negative aspect of this reflection is the girl with her violin case in her hand, waiting for a teacher to appear. But that teacher never came. My parents could not afford lessons for music or tennis. It was a fact, not a grievance.

Our homework was supervised by a tall, lean and dignified nun with a kindly disposition, Sister Lucy. She was like the carved Gothic madonnas I had seen on German Fine Arts calendars. She was much liked by the girls,

probably because she did not smother us with either kindness or threats. She treated each of us with respect. A liberating wind from heaven blew between us and her. I longed to return to infancy, to curl up in the arms of this mother and be comforted. But she took little notice of me because I was not in her class and she did not know how to communicate with a mute. I was to become her student two years later, but we were never close. She claimed no favourites. That was a part of her mystique. She was to become an inspiration in my life. For decades, she was the most-loved nun in the school among past students.

Why was Sister Lucy so popular? She had ‘presence’ without arrogance. She was our comfortable link between religion and ‘the world’, since she did not despise the world. No task was beneath her. She assisted us in whatever menial work we had been assigned. She was modest by nature without any hint of obsequiousness, and did not need to put pride aside.

I loved her cool friendship, lacking sentimentality. You could say she had innate dignity.

I acquired quite early in my time at the school a constant playmate, Frances Hendriksen. Her paternal forebears were Scandinavian seafarers. More than anyone, Frances guided me into the English language, although I was not interested in the games of ‘fathers and mothers’ she frequently proposed for our playtime. They were innocent games, re-enacting the kindness of the home life she missed so much. I did not share her model of a free rural family life and had no interest in emulating the world of adults. As a twelve-year-old, her affection for dolls left me cold. But I welcomed the companionship she so kindly offered.

Frances’ greatest attraction for me was her exceptional talent for the piano. She was so skilled that she was expected to become another Eileen Joyce, the convent-trained girl from Kalgoorlie who went on to play on the international stage. Frances had learned the piano from the age of five. She was called upon to give recitals at school feasts and our association gave me entry to the music practice rooms. This brought me to the attention of the tall and blonde Janice Callander, who offered to give me some tips on the violin, and invited me to play simple duets. I accompanied Frances in my short repertoire, which included Toselli’s *Serenata*, Mendelssohn’s *Spring Song*, and a Gavotte and Entr’acte from Thomas’ *Mignon*. I had not been taught well and had not even learned the *vibrato* that makes a violin sing. Frances and Janice tolerated me with encouraging patience.

I was happiest at this time, and also when singing in the evening Glee Club. Sister Beatrice conducted this because of her love of music and to keep us out of mischief.

The school library was a tiny cupboard. The sorts of literature the more precocious girls wanted to read were books on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books. Curiosity prevailed, and I joined them. I do not know how they obtained such forbidden fruit as *The White Lady* and Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The latter I did not read until years later, and then I wondered what all the fuss had been about.

Frances was a pious girl. Some of this rubbed off on me. We visited the chapel as a pair. Obviously missing her father, she made long appeals to the plaster statue of Saint Joseph in his brown cloak. He held a white lily in one hand and his adopted son, the child Jesus, in the other. She also appealed to its companion, the plaster statue of Mary Immaculate, with her painted blue-and-white mantle and veil.

It seemed odd to me that anyone should address a piece of stone and expect to get some sort of answer, either real or symbolic—even if, as she did, you placed a flower in its hand. 'Does the magic happen only if one says the correct words, or does one have to believe sincerely for prayers to be answered?' I remember puzzling as my heart remained unmoved by the statues in the chapel.

I accepted an invitation to accompany Frances to her family's farm near Apollo Bay at the foot of the Otway Ranges, during the second semester break. I was not sure how I would cope with yet another set of strangers. I learned to smile and nod my head in feigned understanding. We communicated poorly, but there was some understanding between us. We caught the tram near the school to the great railway station in town, then took a train to Geelong before changing to the Great Ocean Road bus.

Life was so secure then that two twelve-year-old girls could travel this long distance alone without concern. The winding Great Southern Road left me thoroughly carsick. But Frances' family was charming. Her father was a dairy farmer and fisherman of Scandinavian descent; her mother had family associations in the art world; her older sister Norma, a fine violinist, was also home from her convent school—and there was a younger brother.

We divided our time in the township between the seaside and the farm. Soon after our arrival, we were obliged to attend the parish ball.

We walked as a light-hearted group along a dirt road to the local hall. The night was moonless, but the stars up in infinite space were crystalline sparklers on layers of black velvet. This was seeing the world as only country folk could. The track went past bush, dark and menacing to me. The Hendriksens walked with assurance, carrying cakes and drinks, while I stumbled along, trying to find my feet in the dark. Even the camp in the country had always been lit up by searchlights.

The 'hop' was fun. The dancing included the usual set pieces: the Parma Waltz, the Pride of Erin, the Tangoette, the Modern Waltz, the Barn Dance and the Foxtrot. There was appropriate music from a local band. I was always defeated by improvisational possibilities, but I tried my best.

Frances and I were asked to give a demonstration of a Minuet to a tune by Mozart. We danced delicately, and I always took the boy's part, because by then I belonged to the taller half of my age group. We danced in the way we had been taught to perform at our school ball, girls dancing with girls.

My friend and I spent most of our time at her family's farm on a hill which overlooked the crescent bay with its breakwater and little fleet of fishing vessels which moved out into the heavy seas. Frances' family had created a garden of primulas and violas each side of a creek flowing down rocks to a gully full of tree ferns. We spent long periods there and, in the evenings, coaxed the family cows back to the milking shed along steep zig-zagging tracks.

Mostly we sat on a low tree and pretended we were Heidi in the Swiss Alps. Frances really wanted me to play the grandfather but I could not wrap my mind around the part. She then realised it was unfair that I should always be the man to her child. The German-Swiss book *Heidi* crossed the boundaries of language and gave us common ground. Frances was still much more a child than I, and found satisfaction in such simple games of make-believe. I felt closer in experience to her elder sister Norma who, however, soon tired of my undeveloped technique on the violin.

One day I was left alone in the farm kitchen. My mother had not equipped me with clothing appropriate for the cold Victorian coastal spring, since we had been living inland the previous year. I was still wearing my bright

red dress with the white polka dots and the small winged sleeves. Frances and her family had withdrawn. Were they all sleeping? Had Frances got sick of having me around? I was uncomfortable at the thought that they had begun to find me boring. Was that why I was stranded on my own?

The smell of lunch still lingered in the kitchen, a whiff of the long fillets of barracouta fish cooked in batter. There were no books to look at or drawing materials for me to use. The door of the slow combustion stove was open, a layer of glowing coals exposed. I warmed the front of my body, then turned around to warm my cold back. Had I begun to dream contentedly? I was such an absent-minded girl, never really concentrating on dull domestic tasks.

Suddenly I had the eerie sensation of the brightness of flame behind me. Was the whole oven on my back? Was I on fire? In terror I ran into the middle of the room. My movement fanned the flames. I began to scream, beating at the fire with my hands. No one came to my assistance. I kept on calling out. No response. What would my mother think if she found I had suddenly died? In a frenzy, I managed to beat out the flames.

Mrs Hendriksen had by then entered the kitchen to see what the commotion was about. She was appalled by the black shreds that were now the back of my dress. 'I heard you calling out, and thought it must be a mouse that had frightened you. Nothing to worry about! But what happened?' seemed to be what she said. I clearly understood her mistaken notion of the mouse and that she was most concerned at what my parents might think of the family's carelessness. She took pains to explain everything clearly to me. Then she told me, by demonstrating with actions, that I should have rolled myself in the carpet on the floor to put out the fire. It was a lesson I have never forgotten.

Fortunately, I was not hurt. Only my hands were slightly singed. My mother's reaction when she found out was typical of her: 'What is a mere dress, after all? Thank God you are safe!' But I fretted for my favourite dress.

Back at school, my association with the Hendriksen family brought a treat. One day a fine car came to collect my friend and me. The arrangements had been made and I was waiting with Frances in one of my better dresses in the visitors' parlour. The nuns watched us proudly as a chauffeur drove us away. At the Princess Theatre, just down the road, special seats had

been reserved for us by Madame Rambert, a friend of Frances' mother. Her London-based ballet company was touring Australia. It was my first visit to a public theatre.

I cannot now remember the whole program, but what stood out was a delightful sequence of sketches: a Rossini-based suite with a Tyrolean setting and improvisations of milkmaids on their stools, beside imaginary cows. Then there was a sophisticated piece about metamorphosis, *Lady into Fox*, very dark. Most notable as a musical discovery was the enactment of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, with vignettes illustrating the poet's dream, the ballroom, the pastorate, the frightening walk to the gallows, and the witches' sabbath.

The Ballet Rambert experience gave me a momentary insight into what it must be like to be privileged. Frances and I were the subject of much comment when we returned to school, and she reported proudly that a whole box of chocolates had been delivered to our seats in the balcony, as if we were indeed little ladies. 'You don't say!' 'Really?' 'What were they like?' 'You lucky ducks!' There was no envy in the other girls' curiosity.

As for my own family, at first my parents came on Sundays to take me out for the day. Then, after I was able to read the instructions, I caught public transport to Williamstown, where my chubby two-year-old brother Herbert waited at the gate. I was his second mother, the distance of nine years being significant early in life. On some boarders' weekends we made the long trek to Mornington to Peter's boarding school. Peter was far worse off than I, being younger and so far away. He always seemed to get a worse hand than me from whoever dealt life's fortunes, but he put up with his disadvantages more cheerfully. He languished in a place so far away, and then had to watch us depart into the distance as a family.

Peter and I spent the long summer vacations with our parents in Williamstown, mostly out on our own, so as not to disturb the Dragon Flower landlady with our games and squabbles. We often took little Hobby (his name for himself) with us. We attended the noisy local matinee picture shows, where manners lost out to high spirits as children rolled Jaffas down the aisles.

'It would never have been allowed by German parents!' I could hear my mother's voice declare. We explored the old harbour works, the beaches and the rather desolate Shelly Beach of the peninsula, our parents accompanying us with sacks to gather black-bearded mussels from tidal rock-pools.

This sometimes smelly foreshore was beside a rifle range and a race course, although no one ever seemed to use them. It was a quiet place, with few others on the beach. The land seemed to jut out into a bay of nowhere. That was Port Phillip Bay. Once in a while a stately ship made its way across the horizon to one of Melbourne's wharves.

Bathers flocked to Williamstown Beach, further south along a curve of the bay. In summer that strip of beach became a tourist resort for the season. The suburb was also a depot for cargo ships, and sea captains and pilots lived there. The dominant population was lower middle class, and few people owned cars. The *basso profundo* of ships' horns was to them as typical of this place as the rattling and whistling and shunting of trains. This peninsula suburb had a weathered, old-world look after the War, and gave the impression of being the end of the line in more ways than one, a kind of fast-emptying cul-de-sac before people moved to more lively districts.

Occasionally on Sundays a band gathered to perform in the rotunda of a park not far from the cemetery. Once Mr Zubek, who had been interned with us from Iran, appeared on the beach with his costly violin, took off all his clothes, and performed to the astonished bathers a brilliant passage, engrossed in his virtuosity. Police were called to escort him away. He once rented the Melbourne Town Hall to give a concert. Only a few people came. He wanted to give me violin lessons but my parents wisely found an excuse.

One of our less welcome activities was to lug sacks of empty wine bottles in a wheelbarrow to the bottle-o near the Catholic church. Mr Zapf, to whom my parents were indebted for a place to live, had a steady thirst. We were permitted to keep the bottle money: the carrot at the end of the stick. Peter and I never had pocket money, except for hand-outs to cover the cost of attending a film, with an accompanying ice-cream or sweets. There was also a small amount that our boarding schools kept in a kitty

for obligatory activities. There was never even a small sum to teach us to be responsible for money. And while our father was home, mother was dependent on his weekly hand-outs.

We were becoming more and more embarrassed that our parents did not attend Church like the parents of our friends at school. In my class it was: 'Hands up whose parents do not attend Mass!'—and my hand always went up. I wished I could spare my parents the dishonour. They were too good, I thought, to suffer disdain in the minds of others for refusing to conform. Our mother made one valiant effort, but after the red-faced parish priest at Williamstown thundered from the pulpit against mixed marriages she seldom set foot again in Sunday Mass.

My mother reacted with equal disgust to the apparent lack of true religious fervour of money-grabbing priests and the restlessness of undisciplined Australian children. For her, this made attendance at Mass an ordeal. We were becoming acculturated much faster than she. We had to pay for our parents' non-conformism by being above reproach ourselves. But Peter and I were spared lectures. In my case, the nuns were proud of our developing strength of religious purpose.

On every boarders' weekend when our father could afford it, he took us for excursions into the hills beyond Melbourne for a brisk 10-kilometre walk, or to the beach at Carrum beyond Mordialloc, where the Port Phillip Bay water became clear. During summer mother treated our sunburn with homemade yoghurt which she grew from a bacillus she had acquired from the Victorian Department of Agriculture. The department was friendly to interested people and also provided literature on how to preserve fruit and vegetables. Since yoghurt was not generally available in Melbourne shops for another decade, I admired my mother's initiative in this new and frightening adult world.

Like other foreigners, my parents grew capsicums and zucchinis, and baked their own wholegrain bread long before these were available in Melbourne. Fortunately, our peers never saw us with these exotic foods. I could well imagine their pursed lips: 'Ugh. Ugh. What's that awful stuff you're eating?' Even much later, in 1954, a visitor to our house asked about a finely shredded capsicum salad: 'What is this grass we are eating?'

Life was safe in Melbourne but it was a rule-bound, conforming society. Foreign ways were exotic and only interesting to those with a sense of adventure. They were threatening to those who preferred the personal

security of a predictably homogeneous existence. For years I became an 'Australian' conformist in all but religious observances. I hid my ability to speak German and my German customs. But I fought for my right to be over-religious (as they saw it) against my parents.

Although near town, my school was on the edge of a suburb that had become a slum. It was a refuge for the poor, the homeless and criminals, we heard the adults explain to each other. There was something exotic about that for me, something mysterious and not to be trifled with.

To return to boarding school after the Christmas holidays became a pleasure. There was always an affectionate reunion. Friendships do not just happen. They are constructed by daily exchanges and, like good wine, they are enriched by the texture of soil and season. Our friendships were woven out of jokes and mishaps, pranks, longings for ourselves and for each other. My primitive new language was beginning to be sufficient to participate in the incessant talk that went on among the girls, although I always remained the least talkative. In time I was perceived as a listener who had less to contribute.

It was the same with Peter. We became better in written than spoken English. Peter and I were not wimps deep down, and my acquiescent behaviour sometimes annoyed me, because people could be with me in real empathy but not show any interest in hearing me talk.

Deserts of lonely conformity stretched outside school, while at home the growing gulf between my foreign parents and me began to cause some anguish. Over time, religion became the comfort which filled that vacuum for me. The problem with religion, however, was that my heart was forever longing for something it could not give me. At the same time, the hearts of my peers were yearning for film stars. We were all probably longing for love, reassurance, self-confidence.

We all began Latin together in Year 8. The textbook, *Latin for Today*, was immediately disfigured by some of my classmates into *Eating for Today*. My parents forbade writing on books. Here at school I could copy the others. I was delighted that for once the whole class participated in a new subject in which I could keep up. I learned the words with my German dictionary, Latin and English at once. Latin was such an orderly language, with predictable sounds, unlike English which went all over the place and

which presented me with ever-new pronunciations. Think of the various sounds of words associated with the letters *ough*! And when did I ever master that cat-like spitting of ‘the’? Probably never, completely.

One day, shortly before her departure from the boarding house, Sister Beatrice took me and Peter, who was visiting, on an outing to St Peter and Paul’s Orphanage in South Melbourne. She was to be transferred there.

This was her personal contribution to our vocations. Every cleric then had an obligation to seek out vocations for ‘the religious life’. There was a dichotomy, obvious to us, between the religion of ordinary people living in the world and the self-sacrificing minority who offered their whole lives in service. We picked up the message that it was an obligation to search one’s soul for a message. It would say: ‘I ask you to devote yourself to My Work, My Word, My Way.’

To be with nuns and to belong to them became yet another emotional pressure. This was an instructive visit. If I felt sorry for myself for being stuck away from my parents, entering the bleak yard of St Peter and Paul’s Orphanage to hear about the lot of orphans was a reminder that deprivation is a relative thing. There are always those significantly worse off!

A kind of yeast was working in me. My body was slowly preparing for adolescence, God’s ploy to distance one from one’s parents. Into my space, something else was moving. I was beginning to fall in love with my religion and all it stood for—the good things, of course. The bad things about it were studiously ignored.

I had leapt into the pool of faith. Did I want to join Sister Beatrice one day and work for orphans? She actually asked the question. The thought was daunting but unrealistic for a twelve-year-old. But a seed had been sown.

My adolescent body was meanwhile betraying me. I was beginning to come out in brown spots! Nobody else suffered such an affliction. I was turning into a spotted and speckled human hound. More spots constantly appeared until one day a young boy turned to his mother in the street and said loudly: ‘Look at that girl. Look at her spots!’ I was shocked. With a body of moles as numerous as the constellations of stars in the sky, you had no chance of falling in love with your own looks. It gave me a ready excuse to loathe my material self and turn to the spirit within. A fine

skin is a privilege, an outer sign of inward refinement, I had thought, quite wrongly. And yet the school motto, *Mirror Without Stain*, reinforced this daily.

I knew that the cover of a book does not convey the quality of the writer. 'Whitened sepulchres' only seduce some observers, said the nuns, quoting the Bible. God was doing His best to guard me from worldly vanities, to prevent me from being taken up by my own looks. The Will of God was one of the central supports of our theological education, and we were to accept graciously what we were given. Not that we ever dearly understood what the Will of God actually was.

I never thought my predicament was unfair. I simply could not understand it. You win some, you lose some is secular wisdom about equality. That I could understand. The rain of God falls on all equally, whether you deserve it or not. It was a lesson in one of the holy books, another that transcends language barriers. My field lay open to God's rain.

Nowadays as an old woman I think I was privileged to have been spared so much that happened in the twentieth century, from 'man's inhumanity to man'. Even as a girl I felt no deep self-pity while struggling to find a footing in a foreign world. My energies were absorbed in that exercise, despite the long days of loneliness. Self-pity comes much later. People feel it for themselves, or their forebears, or their communities long after the initial struggle is over. But where was my sense of being different supposed to lead me? I would have done anything to fit in. But how to interpret the signs?

My peers at school totally ignored the problem of my spots. It was never ever mentioned to my face. They practised the art of personal tolerance to a high degree, despite our induction into one large ideological stream. This forbade admiration for Communism, for instance, especially after the Chinese Revolution of the late 1940s heated up the debate. Within the Catholic community, it was implied that there was nothing special about becoming a nun, despite the status it enjoyed among the clergy. Religion was like the seasons, a part of the rhythm of life. All you had to do was listen very carefully to find out whether you were called to sacrifice your life for the good of the community, and a deeper association with your maker.

Non-believers had a ready answer for girls whose hearts were uplifted by stories of the fruits of religion and who desired to embrace the life of a nun. Nowadays, scepticism is more widespread and the convents are almost empty. But then they were full to the brim. I was to hear the criticism of sceptics even in the midst of my fervour because, unlike most of my peers, at home I did not move in a 'Catholic environment'.

'Nuns are running away from the world. It is easier for them to have someone else provide for them, to make decisions on their behalf. It is a form of cowardice. They are afraid of love and marriage,' my parents repeated, to put me off. I thought I knew better. But how to deal with such conflicts? Obstinacy was my instinctive approach. Sometimes I could not hold my tongue.

The example of my combative parents and of others preoccupied with what seemed like a banal struggle to keep food on the table and to clothe and educate their children had turned me off marriage and family life. Nothing had prepared me for an urban existence where one leaves in the morning to go to a desk and returns in the evening to a newspaper and to confront domestic tensions.

Unlike my brothers, I was far too self-absorbed to understand the charm of extended childhood. I felt deeply indebted to my guardians. The power of their self-sacrifice inspired me. But above all, I was falling in love with what can only be called a sense of God, as a combination of what being human and being spirit stands for, something beyond one's ordinary grasp. Only in dreams could I sometimes experience cognitive impossibilities; for example, how to live in two-dimensional space, or to understand the concept of \$1,000,000?

I could feel something strong tugging away at my feelings, but I had no perception of who or what it was I was seeking with all my heart. I had no sexual stirrings, despite what sceptics might think. It was obviously associated with adolescence, with that outreach of soul most of us feel so strongly then. I was thirteen when it surfaced, at first very gently. It is, I think, an idealism which members of youth leagues feel all over the world. They may be aspiring servants of Communism, or of one of the world's religions, or of the *Hitler Jugend*. While love is the driving force, most of these groups that harness youthful self-sacrifice also have a structure of authority that promises assurance, a place where young people can distinguish or lose themselves, as well as meet kindred spirits.

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