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Swimming for the Eucharist

On the last Sunday of January 1947, when I was 11 and a half years old, my parents took me, my suitcase and small personal bag, off to school. We travelled on one of Melbourne's green-and-yellow trams that still rumble and clang in procession along the same routes out of the city centre.

The tram stop closest to the Academy was near the Exhibition Building, a huge Victorian complex with domes and parapets. In front of it were dry fountains in a state of neglect following years of Depression and War. The surrounding suburb had an equally faded appearance.

We stepped off the tram into a heavy shower of rain. The downpour soaked our clothes and made my white panama hat droop limply by the time we reached the convent. My father rang the bell on the high stone wall. It enclosed tall, dark stone buildings and a bell-tower.

This prison-like setting filled me with foreboding. I wanted to go back home with my parents, but I knew this was impossible. A heavily robed woman opened the wrought iron gates and ushered us into another enclosure which she had already opened up. I noticed several women in black veils with what looked like stiff white cardboard around their faces peering at us from windows inside the cloister. This was obviously a place where inhabitants were securely locked in, and the world kept out.

We were taken to 'the parlour'. This was a dark room stuffed with old-fashioned furniture. Seeing me wince, mother gently squeezed my hand for reassurance. My father patted my shoulder, as if to say: 'It will be all right. Just wait and see!'

My eyes began to wander. I looked up gloomily at the paintings in gilded frames, trying to understand this place I had come to live. I could hear the nuns hastening along the corridor, their long robes swishing, things on chains rattling as they moved. 'The holy women', as father called them, entered the room in procession. They surrounded us, jostling gently to get a glimpse of me. 'If only I could disappear!' I wished, in the knowledge that I was being bolted to the floor of this arrangement. But ever a child of my father's realism in the face of my mother's romantic influence, I remembered the manners both had taught me. I curtsied to the group of inspectors. They looked surprised, but smiled.

As the head women talked to my father in their English language and the others listened in, I examined the group more closely. I had never seen such strange costumes, except on stage. Each woman wore exactly the same peculiar style of soft black garment, with stiff white material framing the face under a black veil, and a large starched white collar below it. From the wide black leather belt around each waist hung long strands of black beads.

After the formalities had been agreed on between them in my father's basic, broken English (which I could not understand), my mother kissed me goodbye warmly and tearfully. My father patted me on the shoulder once more in his manly way, and cautioned me in German: 'Now be a good girl for the Sisters. We are in their debt, you know.'

Fear outpaced self-pity. Before this, I had only been parted from my mother for a couple of brief periods, lasting a few days. All these odd things kept happening to me. 'Here we go again,' I thought. It was a fateful voice. I saw the anxiety in my little brother Herbert's eyes. We had never been parted before.

A buxom and jolly woman, whose vitality bore little relationship to her creepy black-and-white disguise, introduced herself as Sister Beatrice. I cannot now separate my later knowledge of her Irish origins and the total vacuum from which I had to interpret my situation. I attempted to explore my new environment cautiously, by degrees, sticking out my feelers and then quickly withdrawing them again in fear, like a crab investigating if the coast is clear.

Taking my suitcase, Sister Beatrice beckoned me to carry the much smaller school case and my violin, which I had stuffed under my arm when she held out her hand to me. ‘The quicker and brighter, the less painful the exercise,’ she must have thought about taking me from my parents. For she walked quickly.

Her maternal warmth gave me some confidence. I understood nothing of her cheerful commentary as she pointed to this and that feature of a too-grey courtyard over which the bluestone buildings cast their remote shadow. I steeled myself to accept whatever was to happen, to float on a tide of unknowing. I had no choice so this was surely the best thing I could do.

The only patch of greenery was set into two large slabs of concrete. These made up the entire playing fields of the institution. They consisted of two small rose gardens connected by an arbour over a seat facing some sort of game with painted lines, which I was later to learn was a tennis court. A few small shrubs grew in pathetic isolation in front of a cave with a statue of a woman in a flowing blue dress and blue veil, obviously a holy shrine.

The building we entered loomed dark and forbidding, so huge was it compared with the tiny cramped huts of the camp.

We entered a cool foyer with a row of washbasins along one wall and hooks for clothes along the other. There were so many steel cabinets that they turned the corner and invaded a stately entrance hall full of the paraphernalia of a more opulent age. We climbed a broad staircase with thick polished wooden banisters past several landings, up and up, to the top of the building. So high was it that four floors could have sat comfortably above ground level.

We moved through a sparsely furnished living room with lots of chairs, some framed pictures and a decoration with a man in pain stuck on a cross, an emblem I was later to discover in every room. We then entered a quaint room reminiscent of the story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Along the walls and in the middle were ranged many small washstands with bowls and water jugs of enamel, with a little cupboard underneath, a mirror above, and one wooden stool beside them. This was part of the boarders’ bathroom.

In the four terms I spent as a boarder, I rarely saw the inside of one of the two baths or two showers next door. Bathing had to be reserved for special occasions, like an approaching boarders' weekend. The school was too Spartan, too poor to afford the cost of heating such a huge amount of water. There was no lounge, no easy chairs for leisure. If we wanted to read, we had to sit in desks in a classroom.

Sister Beatrice left me with a senior supervising girl, a chubby 16-year-old. Every senior girl was in charge of younger ones. A group crowded around me as my surrogate older sister unpacked my things, an unavoidable invasion of my privacy which my mother had always observed so delicately.

She was helped by her chums who gestured in surprise at some items. The flannelette singlets my mother had made were singled out for inspection and hilarity. The girls nevertheless placed every item respectfully in the cupboards or the dormitory next door. Of this sleeping area I had only a fleeting impression as a kind of hospital row of beds on wheels, with white curtains and blue-and-white starched covers.

Despite my apprehensions, this first afternoon left no wounds. I was not treated as an 'enemy' at the mercy of bitchy English-speaking girls, but as just another girl. The sincere concern of these lovely older girls enfolded me so kindly that I was able to disguise my abject shame at the teasing of their clown, a girl named Maureen French. For she was most amused by how different I was, my manners and my muteness. She grabbed my recorder from its canvas pouch. 'What's this? A flute?' she asked, as she demonstrated. She imitated a hornpipe and pretended to play it, between comical grimaces.

I was so alert to coping that there was no room for self-pity to take hold. That emerged later in life.

It was with relief that I met the girls on common ground on the asphalt below our dormitory. The senior girls allowed me to join their game with a tennis ball before dinner. Each of these kind young women, well-developed with breasts and the restraint of maturity, took it in turns to give me 'a go'. They were suddenly like the sisters I had never had. They had accepted me into their community without exacting anything.

I leapt around, long-legged, in my bright red dress with the white polka dots and the wing-style sleeves which my mother had so lovingly made. They were pleased by my agility and delighted by my pretty dress. Here was

sportsmanship rather than rivalry. On that day Josie Brown, Kathleen Madden, Maureen French, Janice Callander, Cathleen Ryan, Lynette and Norma Keane and others showed how important the encouragement of others can be to a lonely child.

There were only about 20 boarders that year. It soon became evident that the nun into whose care I had been placed controlled the boarding house. They had never had a girl who was a foreigner, without English. Nuns and students must have been instructed to take special care not to upset me. Having no precedents, no models for action, all they could do was to treat me with kindness, but also just like everyone else. This suited me well, because the last thing I wanted was to be conspicuously different.

The boarders only sometimes forgot their good manners. This was most evident at Sunday dinner ‘cake time’, when a practice known as ‘bagging’ broke the usual rules of politeness and Christian tolerance. The quickest ‘I bags’ got the cake she chose. Soft voices were drowned by loud yells. There was no order or fairness. With my mother’s insistence during our upbringing to consider others, I only ever got the cakes that nobody else wanted—which did not bother me greatly. I was prepared to do without in order to fit in.

Another peculiarity of those early days was the routine of prayers. This remained a confounding mystery for several weeks. There was nothing in my life to compare it with. Long prayers were said beside one’s bed at night and after getting up in the morning. We had prayers before, in the middle of, and at the end of school, before and after meals, and before and after homework time. Occasionally a birthday or feast or tragedy allowed for a change to the set routine.

My misguided interpretations of the English language and of religious rituals are retrospectively difficult to recreate. For some time I was bewildered, but I cannot now remember for how long and to what extent. Children adapt more quickly than adults.

In a corner of the end of the dormitory, an enclosure with two half-walls served as the supervising nun’s bedroom. Some with lighter teaching loads took it in turns to be in charge of the boarding house. The half-enclosure was intended to prevent us from talking in bed, from staging the midnight feasts so popular in school stories, and, most of all, to stop us from talking through the windows with men from the ‘bad’ suburb in the street below.

We recited our long night prayers kneeling beside our beds, in chorus. Then we hopped under the sheets and were expected to meditate ourselves to sleep. The supervisor's strictures did not prevent the girls from whispering to each other or from secretly circulating bits of food sent in parcels from home. The nuns' forays from the cubicle used to interrupt these transgressions with the admonishment: 'Be quiet, girls!'

At quarter to seven in the morning the nun in charge would emerge from her cubicle ringing a heavy hand-bell. It made an ugly clanging sound. We crawled out of bed, flung on our dressing gowns and fell to our knees on the polished linoleum floor. Sister led the prayers. We followed or answered, depending on the convention. The girls rattled off long phrases without hesitation.

At first I listened carefully to all prayers, unable to catch any familiar words. I learned much of my English, both simple and complex, in tandem with the monastically inspired theology that was part of the very air we breathed in our Irish Catholic school. After a few days, a number of repeated sounds enabled me at least to mouth words, in imitation. Most evening prayers included a long evocation called The Litany of the Blessed Virgin. After every evocation of one of Mary's personas we replied what at the time I understood to be *pei fas* (correctly, pray for us). I never succeeded in memorising all the invocations, even after some understanding had dawned.

Here are a few of the mystifying fragments of the chant the nun in charge intoned. They can be found in prayer books of those days. 'Mystical Rose', 'Tower of David', 'Tower of Ivory', 'House of Gold', 'Gate of Heaven', 'Morning Star', 'Refuge of Sinners', 'Health of the Sick', 'Queen of Patriarchs', 'Queen of Prophets', 'Queen of Peace', 'Mirror of Justice', 'Seat of Wisdom' and 'Ark of the Covenant'. Now I know these terms. At the time, I had no idea what was going on. After each such metaphor for Mary we chorused the ubiquitous *pei fas*.

Familiarity with the words came to me only after months of chanting. Even then, it was not only my linguistic ignorance that left me in limbo. We were all too young to understand most of the meanings of these words.

Imagine the ignorant humming, droning, mumbling 'pray for us' compressed into that phonetic reading: *pei fas ... pei fas ... pei fas ... pei fas*. I began to identify the meanings of words in association with repeated activities. I wondered why the evening ritual included a repeated

invocation of 'breakfast', still far away. 'Why is this religion so preoccupied with eating?' I thought. Indeed, when a few weeks later Sister Beatrice asked me to read the most common prayers, the Hail Mary and the Our Father, from our prayer book, I was astonished to see that the words printed on the page bore no resemblance to the sounds I had learned off by heart by listening carefully to the others repeating them.

Sister was as baffled as I. 'How could you get it so wrong?' she seemed to remonstrate. This makes me wonder now whether the name for the ancient nun who was initially in charge of the dormitory when I arrived was not Walpurga after all. 'Why that name?' I had thought at the time. In German legends *Walpurgis Nacht* was a witches' sabbath. The occasional rantings of Sister Walpurga (about what I later found to be people called Communists marching up Nicholson Street), gave the name Walpurga a poetic resonance, which I mistook for reality. Although the girls sometimes laughed about her out-of-date ways, they had been much better tutored than I in a religion of 'love thy neighbour'. Used to her ways, they were tolerant, while I feared her sharp chin and humped back that so quietly emerged from the cubicle and stealthily moved around the dormitory. I was horrified that her face might suddenly peer inside the curtains that enveloped my bed. Walpurga or Walburga (as I later learned) was of course protecting us from the evil that flies in the night.

The nuns knew all about the saints after whom they had been named during their novitiate, their training. This religious name separated them from their families and, presumably, worldly ways and vanities. Most of the Academy's nuns were named after early church saints. For a long time my understanding of them was meagre, driven by the need to survive from day to day. I found out soon enough that the other-worldliness of their vocation was not something we could share. We never saw a nun eating, sleeping, dressing or removing her veil. This added to their mystique and our interest in how they behaved 'behind the scenes'.

My weeks of confusion reached a climax during one of my attendances at early morning Mass. Every morning, after we had completed our wash at the hand basin, where we sponged down our naked bodies carefully concealed beneath the drapery of our dressing gowns, we put on our uniforms and the obligatory beige lisle stockings. These were fastened with suspenders. After being checked for dirty nails and lice, we made our beds in the manner of hospital nurses, tucking in each corner neatly, and were once more inspected for tidiness. Last of all we threw a white

net veil over our heads, put a piece of elastic around the crown and pulled back the front veil from our faces. Grateful for my rescue by this fine community, I admired rather than coveted the veils of my peers, edged as they were with beautifully-embroidered seams and held in place with fine, decoratively ruffled elastic. They had come from a special shop. My poor ignorant mother had sewn me up a strip of mosquito net with a tough band of underpants elastic. But no one questioned my plain substitute.

For reasons I do not know, unlike my brothers who were temporarily to succumb to the Australian ethos of being just like everyone else, I was never ever ashamed of my mother. Perhaps boys faced greater pressure not to show evidence of their foreign origins, or feelings for women.

With my mosquito net and underpants elastic veil, missal in hand, I followed the other boarders as they quickly descended the stairs and entered the chapel. Every effort was made to get everyone there on time.

On festive occasions we entered the chapel two by two. The girls sat in two rows of pews in front, with the aisle down the middle. The Sisters in charge sat in separate pews, but each nun also had an appointed place in the splendidly carved polished wood choir stalls, facing each other across the back half of the chapel. The nuns assumed a variety of prayerful attitudes. We eventually learnt to distinguish a particular body even when its face was hidden in cupped hands.

The neo-Gothic bluestone chapel was taller than it was long. A big marble slab in front, with a lace cloth, supported a decorated marble structure, almost like an imitation of a church, with spires and a decorated golden door. The little door obviously concealed the greatest secret, although it took a long time for me to register why the golden cup that was filled with stiff round pieces of white paper was given the highest honour. Along the walls two white marble plaques were mounted, with inscriptions which I later came to identify. One of them honoured Mother Catherine McAuley, the Dublin founder of the Mercy nuns. The nun who established the Academy in 1857, Mother Ursula Frayne, was remembered with a tall, free-standing granite Celtic cross embossed with a sheaf of flowers.

The four school houses, into which all students were divided, paid tribute to McAuley (green), Frayne (red), the erstwhile Bishop-patron Goold (gold) and Carr (blue), after the current Archbishop of Melbourne. I was attached to green, Sister Beatrice's preferred team. Even when we were not

engaged in competitive sport, the notion of what house we belonged to gave us a place in the school which cut vertically across classrooms, and created community.

Most of us younger ones fidgeted during the Mass. We studied the chapel's furniture and plaques, its arched and peaked windows of simple glass tiles tinted in soft shades of orange and green. A number of coloured statues stood on pedestals around the interior, while a set of moulded pictorial plaques in wooden frames, shaped like Gothic leaves of clover, were to become known to me later as the 14 Stations of the Cross, sites marking the journey of Jesus to his crucifixion at Calvary.

Light from the windows played on the brightly polished brass vases filled with flowers in front of the statues and on the main slab of marble. These offered themselves to my wandering attention, as did a light in the red glass bowl on the marble table. It flickered ever so slightly. I wondered what this red light signified. 'Obviously it does not mean that "help is given here", as by an ambulance,' I thought.

On my first day in the chapel I lacked any points of reference to enlighten me. I had never been in a church before. This was theatre and pagan ritual, my only comparisons. It did not help that the Jesuit priest from St Patrick's College, East Melbourne, was in his 80s and looked like Father Time. He wore a bright green cloth mantle over white lace sleeves, and engaged in a lot of mumbling, bowing and turning, bobbing up and down, sometimes kneeling, holding a disc of paper up in the air, as bells rang, then holding the golden cup up high as if he was asking the sun to give it life.

Wow, I thought, this is something secret, something from ancient Egypt, a priest of the temple come to make things right with nature, come to invoke the sun. 'What does this do? How does it work?' I strained for a rational response.

For the next few mornings I followed what was happening with some anxiety. Then during one session, I panicked. I thought I probably had not interpreted my duties correctly. I got up from my knees tentatively, then followed the other girls to the rails as if I knew what I was supposed to do. Sister Beatrice had previously tried to tell me not to go up. But had I understood her correctly? Why was everyone who went to the rails sucking the pieces of paper? Or quietly chewing them? I copied the others and put out my tongue. The priest placed a thin round object on it. I went

back to my seat chewing it discreetly as I thought I was supposed to do. It was not paper after all. But what was it? It was more like a very thin tasteless biscuit.

Suddenly, two black veils descended over my head, and I was quickly ushered out of the chapel. 'Have you bitten the host?' they asked, miming it with their teeth. I was not sure what they meant, but I nodded my head. 'That's terrible, terrible' must have been the mumbled words of their obvious consternation.

In those days you were not permitted to chew 'the sacred species', that 'bread' which I later learned had miraculously turned into 'the body of Christ', 'truly His flesh and His blood', but invisibly so. You could swallow as the wafer dissolved, but you were not permitted to chew it. That was like biting the sacred body!

I learned to interpret it when the nuns worried about me. 'She has not yet made her first Holy Communion!' And: 'She cannot make her first Communion without having first made her first Confession.' But how could she confess her sins if she could not speak the language and did not know what the rules were?

The nuns did not, however, consider this a serious obstacle. A 'delegation' of two priests, including our chaplain, Father Conway, came from St Patrick's Cathedral to examine my conduct. Was chewing the host an innocent, ignorant action, a case of mistaken practice? Or had I been prompted by the Devil? I had a glimmer of understanding as I tried to work out, with shame, what the fuss was about. Unable to penetrate my confusion, the priests soon took themselves away.

I had a German-English dictionary in which I checked out new words and what I thought they meant. The Devil had been mentioned. The German word *Teufel* sounds similar. The Devil? I did not believe in the existence of a real Devil, although *shaitan* was one of the few Farsi words that had lingered on from Iran.

The need to have me prepared for my first Communion was now undertaken with vigour. The date was set for May Day, among Catholics everywhere the glorious feast of Our Lady. Sister Beatrice took note of my frown: 'Ask your guardian angel to help you,' she directed and gave

me a 'holy picture', a card showing a stately angel with the wings of a large bird hovering over a kneeling girl. But how do I get to know 'him', I wondered. Or was it 'her'?

She took me through my preparation again. I tried to memorise a set of words. From that first formal confession, not having enough faith was something I confessed for years. The words were put into my mouth and subsequently became a convenient formula for my inability to understand 'the Truth' adequately. But on that first day I also tried to find words in the creepy secrecy of the confessional for the invisible man behind the grid. I mentioned my occasional quarrels with my younger brothers and not obeying my parents enough.

How did my poor English put that into words? I can no longer tell. Later, for some years, my wider social alienation insulated me from those rivalries that spawn bad feelings, from participating in peer group gossip, from pranks and forbidden explorations, the variations on the moral conduct prescribed to us on the basis of the Ten Commandments derived from the ancient tablets of Moses. For me to become 'pure of soul' I conceived as becoming spiritually like one of my mother's blindingly white starched sheets from which all stains had been removed.

In our Catechism, the tenets of our religion were set out in question-and-answer style, to be committed to memory. For example: Q: Who made the world? A: God made the world Q: Who made God? A: God always was. Rules for thought and behaviour fell into degrees of seriousness. Disobeying them meant you had committed 'sins', either 'venial' or 'mortal'. Appropriate 'penance' was directed by the 'confessor' and consisted mostly of certain prayers and the avoidance of temptation, for which the technical word was 'the occasion of sin'.

If we deliberately failed to attend Mass when we were obliged to go, we committed a mortal sin. If we stole small change from our mother's purse or told a minor lie, the sin was venial. We could only be forgiven if we truly regretted what we had done and sincerely intended not to repeat it.

Like other children, I got the general gist of a complex theology of good and evil. As Catholics we became familiar with strange words and phrases like 'indulgences', 'coveting the goods of others', 'the cleansing fires of Purgatory', 'to remain in Limbo', 'transubstantiation', 'atonement', 'to make a novena', 'ciborium', 'to receive the Eucharist', 'chasuble' and

‘to attend Benediction’—to name only a few at random of the bewildering array I was offered. A small dictionary could be filled with words spoken to us beyond secular daily speech.

For May Day my parents had to provide a fine white dress, which they could ill afford. In view of our circumstances, the need for white shoes and white stockings was waived. I hoped fervently that some of my fellow boarders would also be first communicants, but alas, I was the only one, everyone else having made theirs in parishes at home when they were younger. I longed to be inconspicuous.

The nuns provided a wreath of white rosebuds for my veil, and an escort of younger girls threw pink rose petals out of baskets in my path while the whole community sang hymns. These included the First Holy Communion hymn, which had a waltz-time tune and referred to Baby Jesus, and hymns to Our Lady which I did not understand.

The whole community of nuns and boarders sang its declaration of faith and hope as I returned from the altar. Only years later did I discover how uninteresting some of that music was, and how banal the words attempting to deal with a great theological mystery:

Oh Mother I could weep for mirth,
Joy fills my heart so fast,
My soul today is heaven on earth
Oh, could that transport last!
I think of thee and what thou art
Thy majesty, thy state and grace
And I keep singing in my heart
Immaculate! Immaculate!

It is odd that, in view of the superb tradition of liturgical music in the Catholic Church, such doggerel appeared in our hymnals. At the time, when little was revealed to me and the word ‘transport’ meant going by tram, bus or train, the community of nuns was singing its hopes for my return to the faith of my Austrian family. They hoped that, in the mystery of God’s will for each of us, the seed of my faith would now be nourished.

Many of the strange words and clichés endured by us without meaningful explanations hindered a deeper understanding of ‘the faith’. As I became familiar with a number of its part-mysteries, I felt that I had to hang onto a steering wheel of information with grim determination on a rollercoaster not of my choice. Clever older people knew better and had

tested 'the faith' over centuries. We children were often told that faith does not require deep knowledge: it brings understanding, and 'the truth shall set you free'. This theme kept on being repeated, because Catholicism was too complex to learn easily.

Slowly some of these theological mysteries seeped into my mind and heart. I can now see that the more I understood, the more my heart was opened; the more I loved this invisible God, the more I was prepared to accept unexplained mysteries. I was becoming a true convert. I heard certain statements repeated over and over again: 'Faith defies understanding' or 'The mystery of an Infinite God' who 'always was' cannot be grasped by 'mere mortal intelligence'. We learned the precepts of our religion off by heart, like parrots.

I had not chosen to be Austrian or German. Nationality had claimed me as a member at birth. Religion was to become a further strong feature of my identity. Religion had chosen me. My intelligence was focused on responding. Religion became my lifeline in an alien world. It might also have been my escape from banality. My parents certainly thought so.

Faith began to surround my heart like perceptible radiance. It was expressed through my gratitude before my mind could describe it in terms reasonable to others. It is difficult to put a date on when that happened. Nor can I say whether I ever entirely got over the problem that to be 'chosen' did not explain why others were not.

Were the words and actions of my first Holy Communion to open Heaven to my soul? Whether yes or no, nothing observable happened on 1 May 1947 to mark the significance of the day, except perhaps a near-disaster later in the afternoon.

Instead of porridge for our breakfasts we had each been given a hard-boiled egg with our bread, a privilege usually reserved for Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation, on which all Catholics are obliged to attend Mass.

Later that day after school, as on every other Thursday in summer and autumn, we were taken to the City Baths for swimming lessons. Two nuns escorted us as we made our way, two by two, through the Exhibition Gardens, which were normally out of bounds. It was delightful to walk under the generous canopies of old elms and beeches. Our black leather

shoes clicked along the paths in reassuring rhythm. The lawns were strewn with dry autumn leaves which our lady-like shoes were not permitted to kick about.

The female section of the baths was private. I can still see the tiled walls, smell the strong chlorine and hear the green water splashing as people dived from the low board. The splashing was acoustically magnified because the sound bounced off the tiled walls. I can also still see the black lines of tiles against the dominant white floor, under the water.

On that day, many of us were to try for our junior swimming certificate. Others, more advanced, would be examined for their bronze medallion, which showed they were proficient in life-saving techniques.

The junior certificate obliged us to swim the Australian crawl for three lengths of the baths. My swimming was poor, because I had grown up inland and seldom been near water. I could not get the breathing right. Choking for air as I struggled into the third length, I could not continue. I really feared I would drown.

I pulled myself to the hand-rail and climbed out, defeated. Everybody else had succeeded.

Miss Carey, our plump teacher, took me by the arm. 'Aren't you ashamed? This is the very day on which you made your first Communion. Ask God to give you strength,' she scolded. She threw me back into the pool.

I struggled like a drowning rat. The other girls having finished their swims now gathered along the side, yelled encouragement, screaming whenever I faltered. 'Oh God, what do people do when a ship goes down?' flashed across my mind. 'I'd rather drown! What agony. I can't last. I'll have to give up.'

I don't know how I mustered the will to persevere. I did, somehow, make that heroic effort, like a warrior, beyond imagining, although I could not attribute to God any intervention in so trite an exercise. I did not pray for help. This was a sign that belief was not as yet a habit of my mind.

The others felt differently. My mentors persuaded me that God had definitely given my courage the necessary edge. It was to be some months before I found I could fall into a more prayerful attitude, open to such convictions.

By forcing me immediately back into the water, our tyrannical coach had actually made me swim twice the statutory distance. God's help or not, I never wanted to swim that again. But I loved being in water, floating on my back or swimming backstroke, looking up. I was made to participate in relays on sports days, and I eventually became a reasonably fast backstroke swimmer. This was a way of avoiding having to 'breathe' in water. I could both be chosen for the team and protect my stubborn nature.

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