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Mirror Without Identity

During the first part of 1948, almost to the day of the anniversary of my first Holy Communion, my parents came to an arrangement with Mr Zapf. He intended to buy a house in Blackburn from a migrant from Alsace-Lorraine who was an elder of the Ringwood district Lutheran Church. We were to share that house. In return my mother was to run the household for all of us, including Mr Zapf, his wife and their two children, after he had brought them out from Austria.

I'm not sure what the precise arrangements were. In retrospect they seem rather foolish, especially as the house had only four rooms that could be used as bedrooms. There was further potential for five, by converting the garage. The pressing financial needs of my parents made them vulnerable to this deal. It tended to make them and us beholden to Mr Zapf, who had money in a Swiss bank account.

My mother especially was placed in the position of a kind of servant to him. It was not a problem at first because he seemed to be a man of impeccable manners and charm, who expressed deep admiration for her. And my father was neither a possessive nor jealous man.

Rudolf and Elfriede accompanied their friend Willy to view the house and garden on the green eastern outskirts of suburban Melbourne. There properties were subdivided from large orchards which stretched in the direction of Doncaster.

The house, which stood on two blocks, was within easy reach of the city-bound train. Its garden had a number of well-established fruit trees, grapevines and two varieties of passionfruit, as well as a large vegetable garden well-fertilised by the chook run. Here Elfriede could indulge the

skills of her rural origins, practising a degree of self-sufficiency. 'You are after all a country girl, Friedel!', my city-born father used to remind, praise, tease and reprimand her, according to his mood. I heard this over and over again. When his emphasis rested on '*only* a girl from the country', her retorts were as blistering as ever.

In early 1948 it was painful for me to accept the decision of my parents that I must leave boarding school. I was just beginning to feel that I belonged to a community of friends. Indeed, I was soon to discover that day students did not even associate in the playground with the boarders. The two parts of the school were kept apart. I do not recall any regulations that caused this divide.

The transition to becoming a day student in late May meant that I had no real friends for the rest of the year. All clusters of friendships had been formed during Form I, since the school did not take new students until the end of Form II. My isolation on the fringes of established groups is an experience familiar to migrants everywhere.

Peter fared even worse. He was taken away from Mornington and sent to the Convent of Notre Dame de Sion.

We became accomplished train travellers, although Peter often opted for a bicycle, carrying his younger brother between suburbs.

Father lined the fibro garage and turned it into a sleep-out for Peter and me, to prepare for the arrival of Mr Zapf's family and also my mother's sister. Happy with this retreat, I gathered my thoughts there to emerge to do battle with my elders about our widening ideological differences.

It is a universal need in adolescence to find one's true identity. I was not simply a replica of my parents. As my womanhood rushed in, with its all-too-frequent excessive menstrual cycles, I began to look into mirrors in an attempt to see myself as a stranger would. *Who am I really?* I looked in vain. My identity was locked into the observer. I was only able to see myself looking at myself. I could not get rid of me. Each person, I realised, was physically different from every other person I had known, and yet I could not really perceive myself as others might, except when walking along a street and suddenly catching sight of myself in the window of a shop. It was as if this was someone else's moving shape.

I asked the mirror to tell me who I was because I was so unsure about so many things. I badly needed a recipe for my future development. I was merely drifting on a current determined by my school. My parents did not fit into what that demanded from life.

The mirror reassured me that I was a person with a slightly foreign appearance minding my own business—nothing more. For a moment I would see an ‘objective’ image; as soon as I tried to judge it, hold it, analyse it, my ego got imprisoned in the exercise and my ability to see myself as others did vanished. I was just an ordinary person with a lot of spots on her face and body, I concluded. And yet, I had my own consciousness, separate from anyone else’s. Each person had this. *Why?* Why would God waste time giving us such a unique sense of self if it was not for some purpose? Could Nature alone furnish us with the miracle of self-awareness? I was beginning to ask serious theological questions addressing the great divide between atheism and Christian belief. My intellect was beginning to grapple with questions of faith.

It is difficult now to recapture the simplicity with which my young but isolated mind addressed such ideas. I began to think that the human axis between good and evil, which the Catholic Church monitored and mediated with the sacraments, was not a ridiculous fabrication. Slowly the rational elements in theology began to dawn on me, and develop.

I was aware of grotesque injustices and horrific human actions that ran counter to the notion of an all-loving God caring for each of us. ‘How can God allow such things to happen?’ was a problem. In the anecdotal theology derived from the Old Testament, the first truly human pair, known as Adam and Eve, representative of all men and women, were granted unbounded happiness together in eternal life, before their Fall. This was conditioned by their ‘innocence’. In Middle Eastern style, the setting was a walled garden filled with natural earthly delights, but to Adam and Eve the walls only became obvious after they lost access to the garden through their foolishness. God had given them the responsibility of freedom of choice.

The moral was simple: not to taste the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which was synonymous with the fruit of experience. ‘Trust me,’ God implied, and also that ‘Once you begin to doubt me, disobey me, challenge

me, deceive me, hate me, try to outwit me—the all-innocent, the all-good One—you will lose what you have now, and you will pay dearly for it.’ God did not go on to explain the mystery of the nature of evil.

As children we had only glimpses of that drama of sin and atonement. We swallowed the story of Adam and Eve literally, as did most of our teachers. Like other myths, that Biblical story is highly condensed but clearly carries meanings larger than itself. Literal interpretation destroys its complexity. As adults we can see that it not only reflects human realities but also has culture-bound shortcomings.

My first religious knowledge was superficial and cliché-ridden. Slowly, very slowly, different interpretations began to dawn on me, although I was instructed never to doubt, that understanding comes from faith, not the other way around. Trust me. I hear those words so clearly.

The background to our learning about the sacraments of the Church was the concept of humanity’s ‘original sin’. Each person shared at birth, through a kind of litmus paper effect in our soul, humanity’s propensity to perform evil acts. These dishonoured God by defiling ourselves and damaging others. Baptism wiped away original sin and bestowed an entry to a community of believers, the Church .

Confession reinforced that cleansing. One had to be forgiven grave sins by God, through a priest, in order to receive the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. This provided the strength to resist evil. The Eucharist reverses what was forbidden in paradise: ‘Eat the fruit and you shall die’ in Eden becomes ‘Eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, and you will have eternal life.’

Concern for our common humanity was often over-ridden. To blame ‘the Jews’ for the death of Jesus is simply racist. It confuses and distorts communal theology, because what in history may have been the actions of some Romans and some Jews is taken to signify ‘all people’, much as Adam and Eve represent ‘all people’. Out of my half-understood literal interpretations of the Garden of Eden story as a child, has grown my personal Tree of Knowledge. Its crop of adult reflections was produced without the aid of specialist horticulture. The richly textured human story of Eden and the Fall can be examined by anyone who can be bothered to deconstruct it.

My beginnings in religious indoctrination were painful, as they must be for any novice training in doctrine and religious practice, be it Muslim, Buddhist or Christian. There was some degree of choice: whether to opt for fundamentalist fanaticism or a tougher engagement of the mind.

Often I took the easier way out. However, I was also far too rational to blame myself during confession for not accepting my father's immoderate punishments. Perhaps his lack of control, which had become a habit in the camp, and must be viewed as belonging to those times, set up an unfortunate tendency in me to forgive and defend myself far too readily. Perhaps I should have tried to develop a truly contrite heart.

Committing real sins to forgive would of course have been more meaningful. However, I did get the message that my soul must necessarily be full of previously unrecognised black stains that had to be washed away by the priest's power to forgive.

The secular world continued to produce its own, seemingly unrelated, dynamic.

At school we were, however, encouraged to see everything from a moral and theological position. At that time there was also a vigorous campaign in the wider community against buying Japanese-made goods. No one seemed to worry about German manufactures. As I cringed from my family's unfortunate associations as former German-Austrian 'enemy aliens', I projected the image of a wimp. But I learned, too, that acquiescence and meekness are not necessarily indicative of weakness. I felt bound, not so much to conform to the new society as to pursue a place in life that matched the physical singularity we each carry.

I was aware that the forces of adolescence operate to keep us in touch with our peers, and that this is a tide our parents try to hold back. Our culture wishes us to remain in touch, I thought, so that we can agree about some basic communication with other people.

You get a sharp awareness of culture when you enter a new one and make comparisons, looking back at the old and experiencing the tensions it sets up with the new. Otherwise a lot of customs acquired from childhood, as well as preferences and biases, are taken for granted, like the image in the mirror. Adolescent culture produces a new layer, a sub-stratum, and its own vision for the future.

Our education at school was often reduced to a kind of mass-producing sausage machine. It ignored basic facts about our physical development and our transition to adulthood. Most girls were by then able to have babies but the topic was never raised. Our teachers imparted moral, religious and academic information, usually in that order of importance and often without insight, analysis or discussion.

Heroes caught our attention. Our parents had models of what they would like us to become, and our religious mentors had others. So many streams of intention were—and remain for youth today—in conflict with one another.

We were, however, taught to cope psychologically with alienation. Everything we did was to be offered up to God. Our model for long-suffering endurance raised to heights of significance was Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, ‘God’s Little Flower’, as she described herself. She echoed the sentiments of Milton in his sonnet on his blindness, when he evoked angels at the throne of God: ‘They also serve who only stand and waite.’

With similar sentiments in mind, each new page in our exercise books continued to be ruled up, with the letters AM+DG, every day. We thus ‘offered up’ everything we did, every humiliation, every pleasure, every disappointment.

These were our gifts to God. He knew every thought in our minds. He would deal with the grace that flowed from such an attitude—provided we were free of grievous sin—as he thought best. Somebody else could profit from it. Behind such offerings hung the mystery of ‘the Cross’ and the figure of Jesus who had allowed himself to be crucified, we were told, to free us from the bondage of sin.

While Sister Josepha continued to raise her voice in my friendless classroom, and I ‘offered up’ all my actions in a half-comprehending manner, home life briefly became more attractive. Beside our house in Blackburn ran Maple Street, with the one-sided remains of a gnarled old avenue of trees. They had their heads chopped off in winter only to re-emerge at the end of that bleak season covered in broad floppy leaves.

On this dusty road, I learned to ride a bicycle that father had placed in our care. It was a wobbly exercise, like learning to walk all over again, so difficult was it at first. Then, suddenly, like an infant taking off for the first time with a wobbly gait, I shot off crookedly. Unlike the problems of

learning a new language well, it happened amazingly simply. It was joyful and exhilarating, like the pleasure of learning to run on stilts, but with so much more freedom.

Peter and I shared the experience in turn. On our bicycle excursions, we took Herbert mushrooming and blackberrying. We passed the ice-man delivering his large lump to each house and noted the places where the milk and bread delivery horses left their droppings. To please our parents we would return furtively with shovel and brush and bucket, and make a hasty collection, before passers-by spotted us helping ourselves.

We also shared a talkative sulphur-crested white cockatoo, which had come with the house. He was chained up by one leg in the workshop. His captivity was a reminder of what it feels like to be imprisoned. I was told that, bred in captivity, he would not survive in the wild. His curiosity, however, had not been stunted by his prison. One day I found my small watch dismembered, cog by cog. I had absent-mindedly left it near his perch on the workshop bench outside my bedroom. I was distraught. Money was scarce at home, and a watch was essential for a life determined by strict timetables.

My brother Peter was far less of a prig than I, more outgoing, more ready to embrace life. But his compassion made him a magnet for stray animals. He was only permitted to keep one: a mongrel fox terrier with a jaundiced temperament, who nevertheless developed a certain kinship with me. Peter befriended other fringe dwellers, whose parents were divorced or eccentric, like the boy whose parents had worked in a circus and now made an itinerant living, renovating houses, then moving on.

Both my brothers worked harder than I at assimilation. Their cultivated Australian language made them less conspicuously foreign than I remained.

My father was then working as a draughtsman at Woodall Duckham, and Mr Zapf for the Geelong Harbour Trust. Mr Zapf came home on weekends to a house made fragrant by mother's impeccable domestic attentions: sheets 'white as snow', aromatic sachets in clothing drawers, home-baked breads made from various grains, herbs in the cooking pots, bottled plum cordial, vats of cabbage in brine, cucumbers and onions in pickling jars, yoghurt setting, yeast rising, Silesian *Bienenstich* honey cake for Sunday breakfast.

Little was ever thrown away. My mother's mending transformed rags into new garments. Rugs and painted cloths adorned the walls; a *kelim* turned a box into a seat. Books were cherished as if they were her lovers. She imparted that love to us. There was a rich cosmopolitan flavour in the environment mother created wherever we lived. People always commented on the pleasing aromas as one entered her house. The range of her skills and her attention to celebrating feast days traditionally was well beyond what I observed in the homes of my friends. Life there, by contrast, seemed empty and dull.

It seems strange, therefore, that the fine environment created by our mother could not dispel in me the view that Mr Zapf's house was a stifling red-brick box. Its plaster walls were hung with disposable objects. Here was yet another prison. Owned by Mr Zapf, the house was full of my parents' belongings, and yet seemed a shell in which we camped.

As time went by, I joined the thousands of teenagers who become disillusioned with materialistic goals. While my mother's home was comfortable and inviting, it lacked for me a spiritual base, a set of ideals that addressed the fact that one day we must all die and account for our time on earth. How had we spent it? I was one of the many fish netted by the Irish Catholic cult of the dead.

At school, my Latin was developing well. Learning it was just like getting on a bicycle. The language had an order and poise that made other crosses easier to bear. My facility with religious ritual was also improving. I had caught up sufficiently now, if without any real understanding, to front up to the confirmation rails with the other twelve-year-olds. Wearing our obligatory white dresses and uncomfortable black patent leather shoes and carrying long white candles, we sat with a hundred boys and girls from other colleges in St Patrick's Cathedral. We listened to the voice of the ancient Archbishop Mannix drone on, like a man speaking in a cellar. He seemed to go on forever. What he mumbled I could not understand, and I wondered if anyone would later explain it to me.

We had been taught at school that we were now old enough to accept personal responsibility for the vows made by others on our behalf at baptism. We were to willingly embrace the Church and its community, both living and dead, and give assent to its basic credo for living.

Once I was pondering my half-understood preparation when there was a rustle at the end of our pew. Sister Josepha was whispering to us, each row in turn, that we must repeat the words of the Archbishop and ‘take the pledge’. We were being asked to vow not to touch alcohol until we turned twenty-one.

Word by word the old man dictated our vow. The girl beside me whispered: ‘Quickly, cross your fingers.’ I knew what that meant, having seen Deanna Durban do it on film. I crossed them quickly, just in case! Instinctively, I knew that one should not be pushed into making false promises.

At home, my parents drank wine. Sometimes we were given it too, diluted with water. I would not be bound by this promise. It was not that I had any desire to drink, and I sensed that it was cheating to say words you did not mean. As it was, because I could not properly hear or comprehend the old man’s speech, I simply mumbled a set of sounds so that Sister Josepha did not notice my secret dissent.

Afterwards I was never entirely sure whether I had taken the pledge or not. Everyone else I met had taken it. Why would I be different? I was too frightened to stand out. Probably I would have been counselled if it had been known at school. Breaking the pledge was deemed a mortal sin and unconfessed mortal sins could land you in Hell after you died. It was too horrible a prospect, even though I never understood how anyone could be eligible for eternal suffering. I preferred to wipe this thought from my mind.

At confirmation, each of us had been given the name of a saint we had personally chosen as protector. I chose one about whom I knew nothing, merely because she was Barbara in both English and German. Her story as virgin-martyr, I was to discover, appears in *The Golden Legend*. Her father locked her in a tower and unsuccessfully attempted to kill her when she became a Christian. He was struck down by lightning. Barbara is the patron of miners and gunners, and of those suffering gun-shot wounds.

In contrast to my mother’s enthusiasm at home for the beauty of Pentecost and all feasts associated with the Holy Spirit, how tawdry my confirmation had been! It was probably the fault of my ignorance, for the virtues invoked spring from a tradition in which wisdom has weathered the competition of the glittering prizes of this world, its machinations and its vanities. A few years on, we might have better understood how to explain the seven gifts of the dove god, the Paraclete which, apart from

the supreme virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, now descended into our hearts at confirmation. Like majestic angelic godmothers and godfathers they were to come to us one by one. We rattled them off only half-aware of their significance.

For some time I was not aware of any strengthening of character associated with my confirmation vows to live by God's laws. I was also never sure about the existence of the Devil. A religion that stated that an all-powerful God was all love made the existence of damned creatures a problem. Yet even then I knew that evil was a potent force at work in the world. Perhaps I felt that to delve too deep would be to contact a dangerous and fearful reality.

While at our school we learned little about secular politics, we had a continuing worldly commentary through the stories of members of our faith who faced political or religious persecution. These were also a warning about the dangers of the world, and the power of Satan, the arch-demon. We were taught, too, how ultimately weak evil was before the grace of God, thus insulating our souls from damnation.

Protestants occupied an ambiguous place in the struggle between good and evil. Their animosity towards Catholics proved that they lacked ultimate wisdom. The lesson was not lost on me that Catholics were equally lacking in what I had by now come to regard as the greatest of all precepts: 'to love thy neighbour as thyself', which meant 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.

Protestants were presented as generally much better off materially than Catholics, and as people who prevented Catholics from getting jobs. So we were told. Catholics retaliated by forming their own networks, and their own secret societies, even though the Church officially forbade this. It had outlawed the Masons.

A sceptic like my father argued that the Church's laws had their own protective purpose: it outlawed what it could not control. I knew no Protestant children with whom to exchange either taunts or information. We lived in a cocoon, in a citadel in which we knew 'the world, the flesh and the Devil' were fighting on all fronts. We were full of excuses when sceptics gave irritating examples of where our Church had gone wrong, or spoke of sinful popes or the wickedness of the Spanish Inquisition. While compassion was our goal, I was well on the way to becoming a fervent bigot.

By now I was in Year 9. It is the school year during which girls are most frisky. At the beginning of that year our class of twenty had reached the grotesque figure of sixty-eight, through an influx of 'scholarship kids' on junior government and diocesan scholarships. These newcomers were from working-class families, and most were Anglo-Celtic. They came from homes too poor to afford private education without a scholarship.

They had been rote-fed numerical tables and spelling lists, drilled in the solving of problems and interpreting adages and aphorisms. They were keen on grammatical rules and knowledgeable in identifying capital cities, rivers, lakes and mountain ranges around the world. They leapt like trout and otters from the bland instructional waters of our classroom. Like dolphins they leapt to do their tricks and take the morsel of praise. They left us undrilled plodders in their wake.

Sister Lucy had to cope with the lot, and cope she did with unbelievable fortitude and commitment. To go to the lavatory in a hurry one had to crawl under desks in front, so tight was space. The geography of the classroom was indicative of students' origins. You could draw a plan showing the division of space according to previous schools attended. Desks were allocated as you entered the room, two by two. Naughty performers were of course later shifted, away from distractions.

Having left boarding school the year before, I now had little contact either with boarders or day students. I sat next to a girl I will re-name Paula Brown, who was thought physically precocious, but not intellectually so. She dreamed only of boys. Her parents permitted her to attend mixed dances without supervision! I acquired a kind of split personality, belonging both to 'straight' girls and with the company of one girl who was 'bold as brass', who had chosen me, her desk companion, as her friend. I spent many a tedious lunch hour listening to her drooling over this or that film star, or enduring the banal pop tunes she and others hummed incessantly.

Knowing where my real interests lay, I tried to extricate myself from trouble but succeeded only after a number of disagreeable conflicts. I finally found the strength to break away from such associations, but only after an unpleasant party at Paula's home.

My parents were excited that I was becoming 'social' at last. Mother sewed me a fine dress in a style fit for the 1920s. It was in a slinky long style in navy silk with huge white polka dots and a scalloped white cotton collar framing my face. Everyone else turned up in mid-length flouncy

skirts, responding to that ghastly song they were all singing, *Walking my baby back home*. Its pimply hero seemed to revel in the fact that he had dandruff on his comb.

The heroes of that particular party were all older teenage boys 'on heat'. Some had left school, some were 'at Tech' or were working as apprentices to tradesmen. There were no parents present. Each girl was paired off with a boy, and passionate petting made the dark air hiss and glow with heat. I did not like it. I did not like the boy I was with. I was fourteen, he at least eighteen.

I endured being trapped until at last I found an excuse to leave. To catch my train home, I had to walk alone through the dark deserted building sites of outer suburban Reservoir. Unfamiliar with the area, I just missed the 9 o'clock train connection and had to wait for an hour on the empty platform. What if someone had stalked me?

When the train arrived, I felt nervous about the 'dog-box' railway compartments. I could be trapped in such a space with someone undesirable, away from any supervising conductor.

At the station in town my family was waiting to take me on the next part of the journey home. My father was agitated with concern and the long wait, and shouted at me. My mother saw that I was distressed, but thought it wisest not to comment. Later I told her how stupid that gathering had been.

Although our Mercy nuns, by virtue of their vocation to serve as angels to the underprivileged or sinful, made compassion for others their most shining example, we could not confide in them. They seemed too remote. We never 'told on' each other in class. This was the worst thing you could do in an Australian school.

Often, however, I felt deeply out of place. As the fevers of adolescence laid me low, I felt like dying. I did not want to go to all the trouble of discovering and applying myself to a meaningful life. I felt this most deeply at jolly social gatherings or, paradoxically, in the natural silences which amplified my loneliness.

When our parents took us for walks around Blackburn Lake in spring, orchids appeared briefly and birds flew out of the sedges by the water. But instead of glorying in life's renewal, acute pain gripped my spirit.

These were but passing beauties. Something was missing, was profoundly missing. If only I could die! Longing and nostalgia gripped my heart—for what, I did not know.

A verse from the Bible resonated with my silent cry of pain: *We sat down by the streams of Babylon and wept there, remembering Sion.*

Through religious teachings, Jerusalem had become a homeland of my soul. It stood for all the homelands I had lost and all the homelands I was seeking. In tandem went the verse: *If I ever forsake you, my God, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.* These words provided a potent and reassuring psychological brew. I drank them deep.

Later in Year 9 I acquired two friends who shared my need to rise out of teenage malaise. As a threesome we spent much time at the houses of the other two, closer to town, debating how we could accomplish our dream of imitating the life of our teacher, Sister Lucy. Maureen Thomas, the only child of ageing parents, lived in a free-standing brick box on Clifton Hill. Blinds covered the windows to protect the furnishings from the sun. Margaret England was the only child of working parents who ran a vegetable and fruit stall at Victoria Market. She lived at Princess Hill in a tiny one-storey Victorian terrace house that, like a Siamese twin, shared a wall with its neighbours. It too was dark.

During the long Communist-organised (so we were told) Victorian train strikes late in 1949, I was generously offered lodging with the England family. Her parents, however, knew less about our preoccupation with the spiritual life and becoming nuns than about Margaret's tennis.

Our yearnings, which lit up our hearts, but which elders viewed as morbid, were endlessly discussed during long sessions at Melbourne's General Cemetery, conveniently near Margaret's home. No one thought that we were in danger there.

After some delay, Mrs Anneliese Zapf agreed to come to Australia with her two children, Erika and Peter. They arrived with her parents, Mr and Mrs Neumann, and her lover. The Neumanns thought that their daughter might do well from a divorce settlement.

Mr Zapf had known nothing of this.

On her arrival in Melbourne, Mrs Zapf immediately declared her unwillingness to live with her husband, who of course had paid for their passage. She was, however, prepared to have my mother look after her children on alternate weeks 'for the sake of their father'. This arrangement, fortunately for Peter, Herbert and me, who now had to compete for our mother's attention, lasted only a few months.

It was accompanied by an ugly divorce case, which I was obliged to attend. Some time later, Mrs Zapf died a terrible death from the tetanus she had contracted after a fall in a horse paddock. Her devastated children were cared for by their grandparents until their father was able to look after them himself.

Meanwhile, Rudolf had sponsored my mother's twenty-nine-year-old sister, Else, and paid her passage to Australia. Else had been reluctant to leave her relatives and friends in East Germany to make a new life in a foreign land with an older sister she hardly knew. She had declined a marriage proposal during the War to look after her ailing mother with whom she had fled from their home in the fire-bombed streets of Breslau. They had escaped before the advancing Red Army, pushing a cart. My grandmother had died soon after.

Else joined our Melbourne household shortly before my father departed for Iran, where Mr Zapf had arranged jobs for them both. She took English lessons at night at a state school in Mont Albert until the elderly teacher, a married man, fell madly in love with her pristine beauty and began to stalk her. To avoid him, Else quit her lessons. Her subsequent work in a factory paid so little that she had to earn extra money from caring for children and cleaning houses.

My brother Herbert gives a charming account of how he and Else taught each other English from the backs of cereal packets. She was like a nanny to him, and he grew to love her dearly. Although I esteemed her highly and we became the best of friends for over forty years, in 1949 my affection for her was temporarily moderated by my frustration at having to compete with her for my mother's attention. I came home from school in search of a willing listener to my day's happenings, but I often found the even lonelier Else had beaten me to my mother's ear.

Else was such a truly good person that she tended to see the best in anyone she met. My tougher mother at times found her gentle simplicity frustrating.

Else was one of those rare people not embittered by the War. Her sufferings had, if anything, made her more tolerant, even of those better-placed than she. She nevertheless suffered a version of shell-shock from the bombings that had turned her once-noble city into a rubbish tip. Whenever civilian aeroplanes flew over Melbourne, she began to shiver and shake, re-living the bombing raids that had demolished her city.

Life in debt to Mr Zapf had its problems. The presence of four adults in the house pushed the children into a separate group. We lost some of the close contact we had enjoyed with our mother. It propelled me even closer to the family of the Church. When no one else was in the kitchen I was permitted to listen to radio programs. One day, Mr Zapf, entering, became impatient with my deep focus on a reading in modern English of the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The words 'pilgrim', 'priest', 'nun' brought out his intolerance of the Catholic Church. He had once been expelled from an Austrian military academy when discovered kissing a young nun-servant in the laundry.

On this occasion, he walked over and, without my permission, turned off 'his' radio. It was 'his house', after all. I was furious at his rudeness and autocratic style. My mother feared I might retaliate. Although I turned my back on him emotionally, I nevertheless continued to dutifully kiss him good-night on the cheek, as I was expected to do.

My mother was proud of my moral victory. Of course I would not have been able to overcome my hurt feelings had it not been for the lessons on self-denial we were given at school. Mr Zapf continued to give me gifts on feast days. But although the *Complete Plays of William Shakespeare* and a large compendium of de Maupassant's marvellous short stories were much appreciated, my genuine gratitude went to their authors rather than to the donor. The French collection of stories in English translation still circulates among members of my family, into the third generation.

I loathed having this landlord in my life. My experience was to be a cautionary reminder whenever I later extolled the virtues of extended families, on ideological grounds.

My dislike of Mr Zapf was probably because of his more general interference in my life. Another attempt to turn me away from religion was his appeal to my mother to give me sexual instruction. 'Those moles of hers,' he said, 'will attract suitors to her like flies to the honey-pot.' 'Flies? Those ugly creatures that spawn maggots,' I thought, with beating heart.

I expressed my dismay to my mother. She told me to ignore the remark. She refused to approach the subject of sex, perhaps because she noted my disdain at Mr Zapf's interference, which I thought highly irregular and slightly creepy. It was also because 'she is not ready yet'. 'Nonsense,' grunted Mr Zapf. 'No girl is ever not ready to make love.' I suspected voyeurism. My mother came to my rescue: 'She'll learn in her own good time.' I embraced her in spirit for her enlightened wisdom, and for keeping me out of his emotional reach.

I was growing into a copy of my mother when young, but a less attractive, spotty version, handsome perhaps, but not beautiful or elegant as she had been. The likeness must have made me more attractive to Mr Zapf. My religion encouraged ritual splendour but dowdiness in personal presentation. As individuals we were extremely important in the eyes of our God-lover, and so were all the others, as numerous as the grains of sand by the sea.

Catholicism was full of riddles, of perplexities, of mysteries. We had been taught at school to beware of glamour for its own sake, to beware of 'the world's vanities'. We were told that 'the Devil has work for idle hands'. I was more innocent in some ways but in others more serious, more grown-up than many of the girls in my class. I did not fall in love with stupid film stars. But I was in most ways still a mere child.

Others with healthy sexual appetites thought mother was wrong not to pull me sharply into line. A friend of my parents from the camp, Mrs Lydia Zachen, gave me an American novel by Betty Smith, *The Tree in the Yard*. 'A description of teenage love might do the trick,' I overheard her telling my mother.

I read this noble book about poverty-stricken youths in Brooklyn without much pleasure, finding it tawdry. My mother was right: at home I was an obstinate child, and I was unable to empathise with the miserable lives of the protagonists. I found instead many an absorbing romance in copies of mother's *Womens Weekly*. Both she and I followed a serialised story by Elizabeth Bowen, awaiting each issue of the magazine with some eagerness. We were both beginning to read English with a degree of competence.

But the world still claimed most of my attention. I became increasingly aware of the biological rhythms of my body, of easier and worse days. I was not without some longing for glamour. From my mother's magazines I sketched many a smart costume and fashionable hat, but

avoided fulfilling her own ambition, and overcoming her lost opportunity of becoming a successful fashion designer. This was left to her cousin Vera, who had migrated to the United States.

My father's contribution to curbing my religious zeal was to show me a large German book translated from French, *Der Ewige Jude* (*The Wandering Jew* is its English title). I was to find out for myself how wicked the Jesuits in the Catholic Church could be. After reading this huge volume from cover to cover, I handed it back and voiced my dismay. 'It's full of propaganda! There are so few good people in it,' I pronounced.

My father was surprised and thought me lacking in sophistication, which may well have been true. I have not read the book since. '*Solch ein dummes Mädchen!*' (Such a stupid girl!), he muttered. Although I stubbornly refused to listen, I nevertheless did sometimes wonder if that refrain did not carry some kernel of truth.

He then told me in graphic detail of the Spanish Inquisition and how a Spanish plumber had told him of the quarrels he had overheard among nuns. I did not want to know. My mind was made up. I would not waver in my belief in the soundness of the Catholic Church.

Such experiences only deepened my conviction that I could not follow in the footsteps of my parents. But there was also the indoctrination of school. It was a none-too-subtle recruiting ground for the Sisters of Mercy, whose reception house was at Rosanna, not far away. Girls had already left school to join the order. The religious rhetoric of that time included elevation of the religious life over and above marriage, the latter being given very secondary billing in the competition for religious perfection.

My understanding of the Church's history confirmed my idea that it presented us with a magnificent record across every area of human endeavour: courage, devotion, compassion, service, justice, artistry and knowledge. The Church was teaching us about 'what really mattered' in this perplexing life. I closely investigated its various branches, from fixed and silent contemplative orders to itinerant missionaries.

In September 1949, my father and Mr Zapf left for Iran for an extended period. Mr Zapf had organised jobs more suitable to the talents of both than would have been possible in Australia. They left my mother to run the household with Else.

Both of them had to rely on us children to complain about defects in electrical goods or the ineptitude of salesmen, and to translate instructions between German and English. The women learned English through us, very slowly, and with some embarrassing moments when they tried out the slang expressions of the boys. We children did our mother's bidding grudgingly, far too weak to disturb the peace. With Peter's and my extreme shyness, we always had to be forced into action. We could never act easily. My father's over-exacting will, his many heavy-handed punishments that made our brains shake in their sockets, his domestic tyrannies as we children viewed them, had kept us insecure. We had to steel ourselves to become our mother's liaison officers and messengers into the world.

Under the administration of the two women, the atmosphere at home was warm-hearted. My mother's governance of the family was on the whole reasonable and liberating. Occasionally she sulked in silence for long periods when we failed to behave as she preferred. If we had not been told how we had offended, our guilt was even more painful to bear. She, on the other hand, must have been frustrated that her fine linguistic skills in German had no use in Melbourne and that we children now surpassed her in the language that mattered.

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