

18

Intelligence Testing

Fifteen years old, but still very innocent, I approached my second last year at the school. During the holidays my mother, concerned over the cost of textbooks, strongly advised me to apply for holiday work at a recently established pottery near our home. Although I feared having to ask for work, I did as she had told me, offering my services as an artist to decorate ceramics. I expected to be scorned but they only said 'no', kindly. I then got holiday work near home at Melbourne's first frozen pea factory, Pict Peas, manually shelling the peas. With young and dexterous hands, and on junior pay, I was an asset. The company, which had been established by a retired army major, had imported the idea from the United States. I felt proud paying for my own books when the school year began.

Our class had shrunk yet again in Year 11. So many talented girls had left to earn wages to assist their families. In 1951, only twenty of the original sixty-eight passed the Leaving exam, and there were only three in Matriculation in that year. Sister Perpetua, the Irish-born Head, taught both classes in nearly every subject, in the same room. While one class worked with her, others were busy on a set task.

Naturally we were often drawn into what was happening, so much more interestingly, in the other class. The room was in a wing once allocated for the 'babies', our name for the primary school boarders. With its lower ceilings, this room now used by the seniors of the school had a feeling of intimacy. From a window at the back of the class one had a fine view over the city-scape of north-west Fitzroy and Clifton Hill.

At my desk near the back of the class, I found myself most lethargic after lunch. Then I could indulge my daydreams of my childhood in Iran. I pictured it lovingly in my mind. Images appeared and reappeared unchanged from one session to the next. That's how I came to remember much of that part of my life.

Sister Perpetua was an accomplished, if somewhat frightening, teacher. When she was not becoming angry, with disturbing frequency, with a new girl from Geelong, or with one with Yugoslav parents (which I thought unfair), her voice continued on in its modulated soft brogue. There was little comic relief or the communal spirit we had encountered in our previous two years.

In the Leaving year I listened with fascination to translations from the French while later, in Matriculation, I heard the Leaving class read from Thomas Hardy's exciting novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. I followed its plot as it unfolded and heard it discussed daily, instead of concentrating on my indifferent French, for which I was frequently reprimanded. There was no library I could explore.

During my years at the convent, most parents presumed that their daughters, when they came of age, would marry a good Catholic boy, perhaps one encountered at a parish dance. The philosophy that permeated my school and many others at that time presented the vocation of marriage as of secondary merit to that of a 'bride of Christ'. Our nuns were dearly hoping that some of us would 'enter'. We were even taken to a profession ceremony at the Rosanna convent at which postulant nuns took their final vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, as they lay prostrate on the ground before their Mother Superior. They then received for life the 'habit', the religious uniform of the Mercy order. This was all exotic to us.

I had begun to have second thoughts about entering the order and pursuing its way of life. Referring to her Lutheran upbringing, my mother said: 'Once you put your hand to the plough, it becomes a commitment of service. There's no turning back.'

Father Catarinich, a marriage counsellor, was invited to visit and give the two senior classes sexual instruction. His coy embarrassment at talking so intimately to young girls about the marital embrace and the involuntary extension of a part of the male body (he could not bring himself to say penis), made him flushed and Sister Perpetua turn a bright beetroot. However well-intentioned the exercise might have been, we longed to

hear the voice of a female doctor, not that of a priest or nun. I remember discussing the matter with Ursula Bayne, my new friend in Leaving, a girl of exceptional maturity and critical sanity, who agreed with me that Father Catarinich's visit was useless, and more embarrassing for him than us.

For me Ursula was a good antidote to my religious fervour. She was still grieving the death of her father a year or so before. Her doleful contralto, with which she hoped to sing opera one day, carried on from where her father's funeral had ended. Her ambition to become an opera star took her out of school at the end of the year and into the Defence Department, which she suffered patiently in order to help her mother make ends meet and to put some cash aside for singing lessons. But before she left we made marvellous educational discoveries together in class, especially in English literature with a text on the eighteenth century, *A Varied Company*, and an introduction to modern poetry curiously titled *Feet on the Ground*.

I missed Ursula's perceptive responses and her sharp retorts when, the following year, I struggled through Biology and found that, while allowed to dissect the female of the species, we were not shown male rabbits. We were ladies, after all.

My mother was not far behind the school in Victorian decorum, despite her worldly background. When I told her that a priest had given us sexual instruction, she breathed a great sigh of relief. 'Thank God for that. Now I don't have to do it!' she said. She could not bring herself to question me about what I had or had not learned. She would have discovered that Father Catarinich's instructions had been good for virtually nothing. They did, however, have something positive to say about sex and procreation, and were not just a litany of *don'ts*. Although he explained that monthly menstruation cleaned out the womb of a woman for the growth of a sacred human egg, he said nothing about female sexual responses or the joy of sex for its own sake. His kind of sex had a purely procreative function.

Both at home and at school, then, we girls were being short-changed—but did not even know it. This negligence, this silence, this *Schweigen* was symptomatic of the times. As late as the early 1980s some parents were still aghast that their daughters were 'studying' sex education at state schools, in lessons from visiting doctors. Imagine the silences of the 1950s! There was as much *Schweigen* from our mothers and the nuns on the topic of sex as there was about Nazi ideology and Nazi war crimes after the War among Germans and the Austrians they had once assimilated.

We girls never discussed sex among ourselves. There was immense social shame at the thought of conceiving a child out of marriage. Most of us were not aware of the negative effects on our maturation from the kinds of messages we were given.

Although the wages of sin and eternal hellfire were not major preoccupations of the school, whenever we came into contact with priests we also encountered a mechanical, legal set of instructions lacking moral probity. If you had committed a mortal sin by not attending Mass on Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation or if, for instance, you had eaten meat on Friday or had sex before marriage, you were destined for eternal hellfire unless you confessed your sin and were forgiven in the confessional, or unless you made a fervent personal act of contrition alone.

‘Imagine if you are run over by a car and you don’t have time to repent your mortal sin—you are damned forever,’ was a stock example, a form of mental terrorism. Ursula and I remained unmoved.

Who allowed such ‘hellfire’ priests to thunder at us during a ‘mission’ or during a ‘retreat’? These required us to spend one day, or several, in the company of religious ‘experts’. Our retreats took us to the convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at Essendon. Priests did the talking. We were expected to spend most of these days in silence and reflection. But chatter behind cupped hands was incessant.

After twenty months in Iran, Mr Zapf and my father came home to us in Blackburn. On that first afternoon, one incident left a deep impression. I was standing in the backyard garden when I saw both my parents rush past me into the small outside toilet, where there was barely standing room for two. They were in such a hurry that they were blind to my presence. I instinctively withdrew from the scene, wondering what the urgency was. Despite my ignorance I perceived that this was to do with adult passion, which obviously could not wait until nightfall. Presumably the presence of others inside the house posed a problem. Like two bisons on heat, I thought, they rushed to perform what later I understood to be one of the oldest acts in the world.

I shrank from this display of raw passion from elders who had been sending confusing messages to us about restraint and the nature of sex. On the one hand it was deemed particularly dangerous for unmarried girls, but on the other it was obviously the life and blood of marriage, a noble condition.

My father's language at home was peppered with what my chaste mentors at school would have found 'filthy' jokes. And yet he was firm about the need for young girls to be 'modest'.

In the respectful retreat of my sleep-out that day I thought about the association of sex and toilets and did not like it. I was sitting in a chair. Many German youngsters of my generation were not permitted to lie on our beds during the day. 'Beds are for sleeping, for being ill and for dying,' my mother used to remind us. Desire, pleasure and procreation appeared not to exist. My father would add: 'They are not for lazing around on!'

Rudolf was demanding. We did not enter our parents' bedroom. That was their private retreat. I did not speculate about what might be going on in there. My father always rose early, turned up the volume of the radio and made sure everyone else in the house was up too.

My older brother and I became neither voyeurs nor sexually prurient. My younger brother was the least inhibited. He had a serious heart condition which was supposed to confine his life to twenty-five years. Until he was about eleven he was more gently treated by his parents, if not by his older brother, whom father continued to beat (when he was home) until the age of eighteen. Then Peter showed who was strongest. This violence was sometimes redirected downwards between the boys.

Soon after their return, both men took mother for a holiday to Queensland. Else looked after the three of us. While away, our elders investigated the possibility of buying a guest-house together in Gympie. I was to be taken from school to work as waitress and housemaid. Gloomily I envisaged myself having to terminate my education.

On their return, I heard that the scheme had fallen through. The business was cheap because the place had been allowed to run down. 'Saved by the bell,' I told myself, and gave silent thanks.

The four adults established their own life from which we children felt excluded, like Lazarus from the rich man's table. Teenage loneliness peaked again at home as adult laughter in lighted rooms floated into our dark garden and my sleep-out.

On one such night, after another mating of the bison scene, my loneliness and depression descended. My mother was once again completely absorbed by the men in the house, and my aunt was being courted by a newcomer.

I stealthily collected the big carving knife from the kitchen and decided to send myself to oblivion. I could not have been wholly serious because I chose the garden for this ghastly act. It was a melodramatic plot worthy of the opera *Madama Butterfly*. 'Perhaps afterwards they will miss me, at least,' I thought, with pathetic self-importance. Trying to fathom how to 'do myself in' swiftly, without fumbling, how to gather the strength to do it properly, and which point of my body to aim at without wavering in my courage, presented problems.

Suddenly I looked up at the sky and saw something surprising. Up there, high above, was a dark, deep corridor directed into outer space. It was crowded with little lights, some bright, others obscured by swirling mists. The lights were suspended in darkness and yet I knew they were attached to that dark wheel of sky that was set on its own course beyond the earth. You might see the wheel turn if you waited long enough.

The stars shone cold and indifferent, bent on their own destinies, indifferent to my presence and my plight. I was struck by my own insignificance and the absurdity of my pessimism. Did I really want to leave my parents miserable on my behalf? And what would I get out of my own disappearance?

Chance had again protected me from disaster.

I stepped out of self-pity, forced to concede that life on earth was precious, not made for premature endings. I knew that mine was not a unique dilemma. Thousands faced it. What I needed was better knowledge and perspective. I was so ignorant. So confused. So lost. Lacking in true courage. What I needed was a big sense of humour, even larger than my mother's and aunt's. 'Beware of self-pity,' I told myself, 'it is your trap!'

And so I put back the knife, careful not to be caught. Although on a number of subsequent occasions I was seriously tempted to run away, I was never again tempted 'to end it all'.

Soon Mr Zapf and my father decided to go their separate ways. By late winter father had purchased a three-acre property on the outskirts of Melbourne. The day that we moved into that damp and misty valley on the back of the furniture truck that made its bumpy way up the long drive to the house, an avenue of acacias was in bloom. The house in Croydon, which had advertised itself as *Glenfarn* and as a 'villa', was a roughly constructed timber rambler, extended room by room, without

any eye to style, as need had arisen. Its internal walls were pasted over with newspapers a couple of decades old, under some sort of linen cover. Our interest in these subsequently caused my father irritating delays when he began to re-line the interior of the living room with cheap timber and stop up the holes in the floor.

The latrine was in a tiny garden hut along a path from the kitchen. Mother removed the colonising spiders from the shelter for our sake and for the sake of the man who came to remove the bucket. Much later, my father organised a septic tank.

I was given my own room and three acres on which to roam. I revelled in the freedom which, for my mother, must have become a new responsibility. There was a cow to milk and butter to churn, chooks, ducks, vegetables and fruiting trees to tend. Two paddocks were subdivided so animals could graze in them, in rotation. Our rural splendour was confined within four wire fences.

Despite all the repressive messages in my life, and despite the stand-offs between my father and me, my youthful urges were not altogether extinguished. My body began to sprout little leaves of spring desire after its frozen winter.

One day when our parents had taken us to the Royal Agricultural Show in Melbourne, I was watching young Herbert ride a pony on a merry-go-round when I saw a slender boy with fair hair of about sixteen or seventeen. He was assisting with the collection of tickets. He was entirely self-contained, not interested in anyone else. There was not a hint of showing off.

He did not see me as he spun around. He seemed like those wild tulips that grew in Iran's stony country, although he was probably a suburban lout. All I knew was that I had instantly fallen in love with the physical presence of a young man.

It was a generalised feeling, and had nothing to do with lust. I had only ever been exposed to an occasional fleeting view of the naked bodies of my two younger brothers. I wanted more. I wanted to kiss this young man and feel his arms around me. So powerful was my surge of love that I could not get his image out of my mind.

For three nights I tossed and turned in my bed, unhappy that we would never meet. Although I knew that he would probably be unacceptable as a companion in real life, he remained my ideal for a long time. I met the same type later in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Through the eyes of the old man I longed to be loved by that beautiful young boy, and to recapture those parts of youth that I too had obviously lost.

My sense of freedom in our new home was soon matched by a number of congenial friendships in the area. I had never had neighbourhood friends. In fact I had only ever had four real friends outside my family.

During the holidays I worked in a factory near Auburn Railway Station to pay for my school books. It was more like a large workshop, and each woman worker assembled a different tiny section of a radio used in aeroplanes. While I regarded this work as important, its daily repetitions were tedious enough to make me feel privileged to be still at school.

During the weekends, in the evenings, we teenagers from several Catholic schools explored the countryside or strolled across the nearby golf-links. Romance was beginning to float around us in the moonlight. We occasionally embraced and allowed ourselves to be moved. During the weekend we played golf or visited each other's houses. We were never at ours for long. My parents were too rule-bound. We spent hours talking elsewhere.

One of the boys home from the Christian Brothers boarding school in Geelong wrote poetry. He was a footballer, covered in pimples. He walked about at night on his own in the moonlight, relishing the silence, the beauty of the bush. 'How deprived we girls are!' I said without a touch of envy. 'We cannot walk around alone at night in contemplative splendour. I have to be home by nine o'clock.'

I wished I had been born a boy. Boys have all the privileges, I thought. I wanted to change roles but not my gender, despite the physical inconveniences we girls suffered.

My father was becoming vexed with my indolence on weekends. In view of my work in the factory and because I had passed my subjects for the Leaving Certificate, I reflected on the irony of his words: 'Life is not meant for sitting around and doing nothing.' But he said I was wasting my time staying at school. Nor would he give his permission for me to

enter a convent. He spoke of celibacy as a defiance of the natural order, a crippling of the rights of the body. I should seriously think of leaving school and finding a job, he said. He could not support me forever.

When I resisted the idea, he took me to vocational guidance at an intelligence testing agency.

The test took four hours in an upstairs office in inner Melbourne. How had my father known where to take me? I stumbled out of the test exhausted. The Melbourne summer was peaking that day at 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The bitumen pavements were melting under our shoes. This was not a good omen.

The results of the test were not immediately available. When my father received notification, he was jubilant: 'I told you so!' The report was a dispiriting summary of my failure to meet average scholastic requirements. But it was obvious to me, immediately, that my own stated preferences had been given some consideration—for instance, that I enjoyed English Literature and Art, but not History or Science. I regarded them as rigid, rule-bound, not open to interpretation. No consideration had been given by the testers or the assessors to my cultural formation, to my educational vicissitudes, to my mother tongue. No concession was available for my use of English as a second language. During my visit they had found me personable and included this impression of me in their recommendation. 'She will never manage Matriculation, least of all University. She will suffer a nervous breakdown if she persists. She has some literary flair—an 80 per cent rating—and therefore will make a fine secretarial stenographer. She could also be a compassionate nurse and an attractive air hostess.'

I had not the slightest interest in healing people's wounds unless obliged to do so as part of religious service. I was certainly not attracted to serving people tea in the air, and had in fact never been inside an aeroplane. I was not at all attracted to flying in any form. I realised that one could learn to do such tests. So I stood my ground. 'If I have any say in it,' I told my father, 'I will stay at school and make it through my studies.'

My father did not appreciate having his will thwarted. Towards the end of the holidays he and my mother came to see the nuns. He waved the report of the intelligence testers at them. Sister Perpetua called Sister Lucy to help her deal with this troublesome parent. Both women filled my father's head with carefully worded praise. And then they told him they certainly saw the potential at school and in their religious order for my style of

concentrated work. ‘She’s slow to learn, a bit of a plodder. But what goes into her head stays there. That’s not something you can say of many of my students,’ Sister Perpetua explained. ‘She will overcome her challenges.’

My father grudgingly gave in to the nuns’ faith in me, and I was permitted to return to school. Hurray! Had I put it into words, my joy would have found appropriate expression in the poetry of Psalm 34:

The angel of the Lord is encamped
around those who revere him, to rescue them.
Taste and see that the Lord is good.
He is happy who seeks refuge in him.
Revere the Lord, you his saints.
They lack nothing who revere him.
Strong lions suffer want and go hungry
But those who seek the Lord lack no blessing.

Those angelic nuns at my tent, pitted against my father’s strong lions—that’s how I viewed my escape.

Matriculation year began in the other half of the classroom. There were six of us left. It was a promising six: Pamela Brady, Kathleen Kehoe, Pamela Poynton, Judith Wison, Mary White and I. Each of my lovely comrades came from a family who had been several generations in Australia. We got on well as a group and were to spend the rest of the year in co-operative work, without competition. We were all to sit external examinations, but we approached them together, in good humour.

The ethical lessons of the nuns were beginning to become transparent to me. In contrast to the competitive and artistic education of the camp, and to an ethos there favouring exclusive cliques, the Mercy nuns offered me rather a bland education, but one rich in compassion and humane values. Even its puritanical streak did not dilute the basic message found in the New Testament: that love was the greatest of all qualities and concern for one’s neighbour the cornerstone of civilised living.

The school at that time had no speech night, nor prize-giving ceremony, no board of honour. Three of us, as if by random selection, were made prefects, a mere formality, because it was the custom. Although they put me on top of the three, all of the seniors were now role models for the younger girls. We were asked to help keep order in the playground, encouraging others to keep up the good name of the school in comportment and cleanliness and behaviour on public transport. We were not expected to be

arrogant bullies or superior beings. Nothing much distinguished the three prefects from the other seniors, except that we three were given particular tasks, especially in liaison between girls and staff. We were popular as a team with younger students.

Mostly we concentrated on our studies, despite the disruptive setting, one room for two classes. We also became involved in the social life of the school. This included fundraising activities for the Young Catholic Students movement. YCS discussions were prompted by the Apologetics we had been studying systematically since Year 11. These were a set of common questions about Catholic dogma to which answers had been attached. We committed the lot to memory. They explained our beliefs, when we were asked to do so, with pat answers. We were like mechanical talking dolls.

We were also forced to be resolute. Lessons in Church history provided examples of the Church's resilience and durability despite enemies who set out to hoodwink its members. We were given models of illustrious thinkers and scientists in the history of the institution. Their steadfast example would prompt us when our individual reason came into conflict with our faith. In the end the institution always triumphed over human failings, including its sinful members. I took this view on board, but did not allow it to concern me too much.

Although I found studies quite difficult, I also found much joy in reading *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*. The Victorian-age poets, Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, brought me much pleasure. I shared these treasures with mother, who consumed them greedily. A marvellous book of speeches and essays, *Prose of Purpose*, still chimes in my mind. It offered an introduction to great speech writers and essayists through excerpts which we used for exercises in precis writing.

Eleanor Dark's attempt to re-create Australian history in *The Timeless Land* failed to convince me. It stayed as bland as its title, but was nevertheless a subtle introduction to Australian studies after my experiences with English and continental Romanticism. It was like stepping from Governor Phillip's ship onto the shore of an arid continent, Aborigines with spears on the periphery.

My delicate scientific drawings showing every scale of a fish were waved aside impatiently by my teacher: 'This is science, not an art class.' They were, however, kept for years by my much more appreciative family.

Unfortunately, my father lacked the ability to explain technical things to me. I tried to understand him in vain. We were like chalk and cheese. Had he been wiser he may well have helped me construct scale models of buildings. His influence had made me observant of architecture.

My desire to join the Mercy nuns received a decisive set-back during preparations for the school fete, when I caught two nuns quarrelling like angry seagulls over spaces for their stalls. Such incidents, along with Sister Perpetua's obsessive targeting of the two girls, made me review my plans. How could I live with people who 'picked on' others daily, as Sister Perpetua did? And how face a repetition of the verbal sword fights I witnessed at home? So far I had been protected. No one had ever singled me out for abuse at school. But would this protection last? In an Australian setting, I was too weak to defend myself. To date my energies had been employed in making myself tolerated and liked. Since the departure of Sister Beatrice and the death of the music teacher, Sister Winifred, who else shared my taste in classical music? Was I to be deprived of one of my greatest sources of inspiration? To what purpose? Catholicism was no longer meant to be masochistic.

I secretly thought: perhaps I can still make it to University.

What is interesting in the story of my Matriculation year is its comment on the skills of so-called professional intelligence assessors. At the end of the year, I obtained sufficiently good results in five of my six subjects to entitle me to a Commonwealth Scholarship to Melbourne University. Another indicator that I was not a mere battler was when I won, unaided, two of the three top places in two Victoria-wide school essay competitions.

Then, of course, I had finally to face the question of the convent. The Christmas holidays were an agonising time. Was I influenced by my parents at last? Did I lack the conviction that I could be happy placing my future into the hands of women with whom I had only marginal cultural empathy?

I shrank from making an immediate decision and wrote a letter to Sister Perpetua telling her that I would not be joining the order just yet. Since I had given her to understand that I would probably be doing so,

and reluctant to mislead her, I found the writing and posting of that letter one of the most difficult things I had ever done. After all, I owed the nuns a considerable debt of gratitude. They had stood by me when I really needed them.

I did not receive a reply. There was only *Schweigen*.

The University had suddenly come within my reach, but I had no means to get there. Sister Perpetua had failed to tell me about my entitlement to apply for a Commonwealth Scholarship. My parents were relieved that I had not sought admission to Rosanna, which would have required my father to provide me with a nun's dowry and even a 'wedding' dress.

But my father still held out against giving me any financial assistance to pay for further studies.

'You girls waste our money. You say you want to study for a profession and then you only end up getting married,' he said. Perhaps he was right. At the time, however, I did not intend to become someone's wife. I was now set on a University education to better equip me to make an informed choice about my future.

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