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EDUCATION

When my father moved our family from Gawler South Australia to Sydney, one of my mother's problems was where to put me to school. It wasn't my father's problem; education was my mother's province. He was an unblest businessman but she had all the reverence and passion for formal education that has been historically engendered in the persecuted Celt. Besides, for two delirious years before her marriage she had been a school-teacher and as her view of marriage became steadily more jaundiced her remembrances of her short-lived career became the rosier.

Up to this time I had been taught in small Roman Catholic parish schools where the nuns and brothers were dedicated souls, usually Irish by birth or descent and with all the simple hair-trigger passions of the celibate. To these teachers I was something of a pet. I was bright and home-tutored (by the Montessori method, no less) and, contrasted with my bare-footed, out-at-arse fellows, affluent. Amongst these sons and daughters of Irish fettlers or out-of-work labourers it was not much trouble to win top of the dung-heap.

By the time we left Gawler I was very secure of my superiority in many areas. I was undisputed first in my class, beloved of all the teachers but still popular with most of the students. I was always chosen captain of some games' team or other, had medals to prove that I could run and jump better than any of my peers, brought cheese and meat sandwiches in waxed wrappers for lunch while around me the Gallaghers and Keenans ate thick bread and pickles out of newspaper. Moreover I was holy, no doubt insufferably so. I was a daily communicant, an ardent and constant pray-er, could serve Mass long before I was big enough to carry the heavy missal from one side of the altar to the other, and a prefect of the Sodality of Our Lady. I had my heart set on becoming a priest at the age of five and at the age of ten had tried desperately to persuade my mother to let me enter a religious training college for young boys. All in all, I was a real little Stephen Dedalus with one exception.

My grandfather, a huge tough man whom significantly I called Pop, was a rabbit-trapper and bushman. The greatest times of my life had been spent camped out with the old fellow, running his line of traps, listening to his tales and bits of bush-lore that he explained. "What's the good of being a priest?" he used to ask. "They're a lot of old women, those coves. Dressed up in skirts. They'd never last in the bush. You've got to be a man, carry traps, live rough. They wouldn't last two days in this country."

I used to tell him about Father Damien and pray for him. It was proof of my love that I stayed loyal to his positive values but no one but myself knew how much his church jibes hurt.

By the time I came to Sydney, the bush had the seminary against the ropes in the war for my soul. I wanted to go to Hawkesbury Agricultural College, but alas, it was neither

Catholic nor academic. My school had to be both. Moreover, my mother, like so many Irish, had social aspirations, as well.

"You're not going back to those Marist Brothers, either," she affirmed. Like John Joyce her heart was set on the Jesuits. "So educated, each one with a University degree, they give the finest education in the world. You only have to look at the lovely grey suits the boys wear to know they are men of taste. Not like the ugly navy-blue uniform at St Joseph's. Huh! You'd look like an Italian."

St Joseph's was Marist and to that extent familiar and failing Hawkesbury, it was where I wanted to go. But my mother had her heart set on the Jesuits. Theoretically the choice was mine but it is extremely doubtful whether this existed in practice, for in middle age I see clearly the flint and steel that make up the spark in my mother's soul. Cunning as Ulysses, she showed me the magazine of the Jesuit College, jejunely called Riverview because it overlooked the Lane Cove River.

I turned the pages of the magazine for hours with its photos of dormitories, boys in long flannels on vast cricket grounds, racing eights with boys forming a guard of honour with oars, handball courts, rugger teams, and a chatty diary of daily doings. It was like something out of *Gem* or *Magnet* or *Chums* or *The Fourth Form at St Dominic's* or even *Tom Brown's School Days*. I had visions of honourable, stalwart students who called their mothers and fathers "mater" and "pater", decent manly chaps, imbued with the school spirit, winning fierce games with broken arms and being expelled because they wouldn't rat on their mates. My addiction to school-stories was my undoing. What I didn't see until long after I'd left school was that the Riverview magazine was as much a romantic creation as anything Frank Richards wrote about Greyfriars. Light literature and adventure stories brought Lord Jim into the merchant navy and disastrous reality. The reality the Riverview *Alma Mater* brought me to, was no less shattering.

Apart from the bewildering strangeness of being lost among 300 boys instead of 80, of trying to find one's way in a four floored college maze instead of four tin-roofed rooms, the most striking factor about my new school was the insouciance and hair-raising impiety of the other pupils.

At this time I used to tell in confession my rare ejaculations of "hell" and "damn" under the heading of "swearing and blaspheming", and regarded looking up the word "fart" in the dictionary ("emission of air from the anus") as filthy reading. The language of tough, rich, public school boys sounded like the maledictions of the damned. My parish school fellows were innocent cherubin beside these bloods.

"Can you shot-putt?" one team captain asked me when I recounted my athletic triumphs to him, soon after my arrival.

"I don't know," I replied. "What is it?"

"You putt, throw, a steel ball as far as you can."

"Get out of it," snickered his companion, looking at

my puny frame. "He couldn't sling his own balls two feet."

I felt as if I'd been struck, the more so because I'd already come to admire the last speaker who was a natural leader and a great sport and the exchange burned into my sensibilities.

Not many weeks after starting at my new school, I crushed my finger and my mother, as ignorant as I of the precocity that prevailed in a fast boys' school tied it up and covered it with a rubber finger-stall.

"What's that on your finger?" asked one sophisticate aptly named Beaky O'Neill.

"A bandage. I hurt my finger."

"What's the rubber thing?"

"It's a finger stall. It keeps the bandage on."

"Gissa look at ud."

"Painfully I rolled it off and handed it over. He shook it out and held it up for the class to see.

"Hey, Dearny! Take a look at this. He's only got it on his finger, the dirty little bugger. Pooh! And smell the bastard. Probably poxy. Oh, I'm taking this to the Mouse." (The Mouse was the rector.)

I was apalled. I knew dimly of things called frenchies which men put on their botties for the devil only knows what obscure and filthy purposes. My young brother had once found some in a park and caused consternation at home when it was found he was chewing one. There was no doubt about this finger stall, now it came to be mentioned, looking uncommonly like one of these, so it behoved me to protest innocence the more vigorously. My insistence that it was a genuine medical product and came from a chemist shop served only to convulse the class further. I refused to wear the stall again, naturally enough, I suppose, but I also scrupulously told the whole incident in confession, convinced that I had sinned by being involved with something that even looked like a french letter. Also I mistook humiliation for guilt.

"Take no part in the dirty talk of such boys," my confessor told me. "As long as you take no part and no pleasure, there is no sin." Pleasure! He had to be joking.

For months I walked corridors and inhabited class-rooms trying not to hear the "fucks" and the "shit a brick"s which thudded into me like bullets. I cast my eyes from the empty Modess carton in which some wag had packed a consignment of Riverview exercise books. Modess I knew had something to do with the private parts of girls and therefore part of that impure life which was to be avoided by the chaste. I couldn't quite see how girls managed to be pure and still have dealings with Modess but that wasn't my problem. My companions at all events were less squeamish than I and descended on the carton with a whoop. One drummed on it with his hands.

"Rag-time. Rag-time. It's the real gone shag-time," he sang.

"Where's Pooftah Hughes?" (Why?)

"This is the monthly the cuckoo likes, And so do I."

I knew it was filth, but that was the only thing I did know about it.

When the first term results were sent home, I had come eleventh out of thirty-four students. My mother was shocked

but no more so than I. Second or even third we could have swallowed and honourably set about cutting back the leeway. But eleventh! How did you go about making up ten places? Such a thing has never happened before in the family. Both my older sisters consistently topped their classes. Neither my mother nor I could understand it, but the truth was, though I didn't see it until years after I'd left school, that I was out of my league. There were at least four scholarship boys in my class, and most of the others came from wealthy homes with libraries and often traditional university backgrounds. Very different students these from the freckle-faced Murphies out of the railway humpies in Gawler. These knew about books and study, had travelled and had surely eaten of the Tree. In this field, it was I who was the under-privileged. My father owned a steam laundry, a fact which I fearfully hid from the mocking sons of graziers and Macquarie Street specialists. I was on sixpence a week allowance plus bus fares; the boarders talked easily of quids and fivers. Sometimes when deliveries took him that way, my father insisted on driving me to school in his yellow van, but I always made him drop me at the drive-gates. I knew the sort of reception a yellow van would get in a community where I had seen as many as four Rolls-Royces at the one time, waiting to pick up their respective scions.

The following term I pulled up to ninth place but finished the year thirteenth, and gave up. By the time of the trial Intermediate the following year I was pulling down marks of 3% for Maths, 16% for Latin, 27% for French and coming 29th in the class. Moreover, whatever the 'finest education in the world' might have had to offer in other times, other places, at this time and place, it is clear to me now after years of teaching, it lacked any kind of excitement, indeed in many instances lacked sound teaching method. Maths, History, French were taught by dictation of notes and rote-learning. Religious Knowledge of course was taught by rote. In English we concentrated on the Romantic poets and the Victorians, learned that Gray's Elegy was the most perfect poem in the language but that Hopkins was the greatest poet, and Shakespeare a Catholic.

One was encouraged to achievement by the sock, an eighteen inch length of 2"x¼" harness strap which the masters carried like side arms in a pocket inside their gowns and which adepts like Butch Connolly could draw quicker than Wyatt Earp. It is an interesting fact that the more I was socked, the more I went downhill despite all my conscious efforts to the contrary. I can't explain this, but once you got on the sock circuit it seemed impossible to get off. In recognition of this and in an effort to neutralise the system a number of boys organised a competition among themselves with a prize for the boy with the highest confirmed sock score, of 100 cigarettes, for which if caught in possession he would get 'six on the bum'!

Inevitably estrangement between myself and my teachers set in, but in any case priorities of preference generally followed a fairly set pattern at Riverview. Sons of Old Boys invariably took pride of place both with students and staff, boarder-sons of graziers came next, boarder-sons of

professional men after them and finally through one or two less elevated gradings one came at the bottom of the barrel to dayboys and even some of these had money and influence.

In default of establishing a niche in other groups I cultivated the outlaws and the zanies, the buffoons and the drop-outs. I clowned along with them and even won some kudos among them by my talent for full-blooded draw-back smoking without chucking. My only other area of acceptance was on the Rugby field where I forced it.

Here I found that I could compensate furiously for all my humiliations and inadequacies by blindly tackling anyone running with the ball. Sometimes I even tackled my own side, but this didn't matter much for in a sense they were all enemies. Frequently I buried myself more deeply than my opponent but this didn't matter either, as long as he came down. While the reputation I slowly built up as a sort of rugby kamikaze was at best a *succès d'estime*, the bruises each successive encounter laid on my body were as nothing to the balm it laid on my soul.

Out of sheer self-protection, I became "knowing" for the pain of my innocence was unendurable. I knew why the difference in weight between a cow and a bull was "two stone", why when someone asked Dick Hannigan, "Have you got a piece of string on you, Dick?" he replied "What do you think it is? A yo-yo?" I became used to being called Botty, Arsey, Bumley or whatever suggestive pun could be made on my name. The straight out racist "Black Man" because of my Lebanese extraction and dark appearance, I could not cope with because the humour in it was a sneer, a familiarity, contempt. A form of bon mot at the time went like this:

"Hey Black Man! What's that stuff on your forehead?"
"I don't know." (Wiping and looking at the hand)
"Perspiration."
"Grease, Black Man. It's the goulash grease."

I asked my mother not to put butter on my sandwiches, not to give me cheese or pastry, but she thought I was up to my old tricks of self-mortification and refused because of my health so I used to scrape off what butter I could and give away any cake or buttery sweets. But I still perspired.

By my sixth and final year I was a consistent low achiever, and a converted revolutionary though I didn't know it. I mucked up in class, smoked, told dirty jokes, laughed raucously at all the innuendo words in class, "prick" "tube" "point" "hole" "crack" "bronze" "brown" "date" "split" "cream" "flog" "belt" and dozens of others, farted deliberately to discomfort my neighbours and generally played at school the swaggering sexual savant. At home, I was an insecure and self-hating masturbator, warring with my mother and weeping for my lost innocence and vanished vocation.

Six weeks before the Leaving Examination, Zombie Dennet a rigid emotionless man who was celebrated for examining his handkerchief after a nose-blow as scrupulously as if it were his conscience then folding the whole thing, ends tucked in, into a neat little parcel in his pocket, threw me out of the History and then the English class. One can hardly blame him. Condemned for years to be a clown, I was even sick myself of my folly and interjections.

I took my exile as something of a challenge, and during these periods applied myself to my books in the study-hall.

Certainly the only two subjects in which I gained distinctions were English and History. French and Latin I passed at 'B' level. I did not matriculate.

"Pity he didn't get thrown out of all his classes," was my father's commonsensible remark for which my mother emphatically pinned back his ears.

Probably she saw, even if he didn't, the implications of that comment on six years of "the finest education in the world".

I lasted six months as a clerk at Dunlop Rubber before I rolled my swag and fled to the bush. There I drifted around happily for the next ten years, lost my Faith, and thought that Pop had won after all. But for all his toughness and strength, as it turned out, his daughter was even tougher and more enduring.