

### 3: Adult life and love

#### *Nursing*

WHEN I FINISHED my studies I was appointed social nurse to the medical clinic at Saint Peter's. No longer a student, I had to relinquish my college room and could think of no other alternative but to squeeze back into my parents' apartment. I had left home as an eighteen-year-old, naïve, ignorant of the ravages of poverty and disease.

When I came back into their fold, my parents paid no heed to the reality of these four years during which I had matured, shed more than one layer of impermeable skin and experienced honorably the weight of responsibility and trust. Returning to the familiar nest, as an outgrown fledging, I had to forgo the privileges taken for granted – a room away from prying eyes, and unqualified freedom after working hours. When I was young, my brother's blunt response to my mother's inquisitive questions elicited my envy. When my mother routinely asked, 'Where are you going?' I didn't have the gumption to answer 'Out'

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(as he used to do). Oh, to be of the male gender! Aged twenty-two, I had joined the ranks of the wage earners yet was not offered a front-door key. Memory is not only fickle; mine is like tissue paper nibbled at randomly by silverfish because, hard as I try, I cannot recollect which room was mine in my parents' apartment.

Our family culture exacted that I hand over my salary in exchange for some pocket money. The only clear image I have is that of the blonde-wood bookcase, guardian of the money I managed to save. I had adopted the socialist credo which protected one from the pitfalls of acquisitive materialism, which pronounced as bourgeois the wanton habits of using make-up, hankering for pretty clothes or going to dances. These rules ran in the grooves of my search for an unblemished soul.

My soul, this vibrant parcel of emotions, held complex questions such as: 'How does one live a principled life?' and 'Who am I?' That I never came across the lives of the saints was fortunate. Reading of Baudelaire's torments was bad enough! *Mon âme* continues to echo even now... incomparable, poignant murmurs, different from that of the English word – soul.

In September 1944, I did not stand amongst the crowd shouting and throwing flowers when the English army entered Brussels. I wasn't there when our surrounding streets renounced their old clothes, the habit of silent, hurried walking, and the muted greetings of acquaintances. Nor was I outside breathing with relief, shedding

four years of weariness in one sweeping long victorious cry.

This was because my mother, without warning, had gratuitously promised my help to an acquaintance. 'My daughter will not mind sitting with your wife while you go out.'

As soon as I stepped inside our neighbours' house I recognised the peculiar smell, the sweetish odour of a dying body which slyly clouded the scent of lavender, her citrus eau de cologne and that of the bunch of bright yellow roses on the sideboard. I had never set eyes on this poor woman before. She breathed unevenly and remained motionless, oblivious of my presence. She had indeed 'lost her war'.

I had witnessed many deaths. It is a fact that people die every minute of every day and now I felt acutely my isolation, cloistered against my will while such amazing events were happening outside. That I missed this special occasion – the liberation of Brussels – a once-in-a-lifetime moment, triggered a vivid memory, blemished and fanned by anger. The room was quiet, heavy drapes hung over the tall windows, but I heard muffled snippets of military music. My mother no doubt would have been among the delirious throngs of people.

After 'liberation', the atmosphere in Brussels' streets changed dramatically and while I understood that freedom from oppression made us drunk, I felt unease and repulsion when I witnessed a crowd abusing German soldiers. These vanquished had to wipe the spittle that the

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self-righteous were free to brand them with. My brother, himself a soldier, comforted me later when he admitted pity for these old men and these youths barely out of childhood, forced by Hitler's military machine into an already doomed army. I despised the behaviour of some when bravado brought cowardice. It was, in a way, a dangerous time when safety nourished odious conduct. Some people acted first and repented or regretted too late the mistaken identity of their victims.

I watched a crowd once, masses of people who were looking and cheering while someone was throwing furniture out of a window. That 'someone' had believed that the occupant of the apartment had been a collaborator. It was sickening to watch the way people who had no idea of the facts, clapped and shouted 'Bravo!' only to find out later that it had been the wrong apartment and the action had been perpetrated on an innocent.

In a similar vein, a young woman whom I knew had been given the task of engaging with Austrian soldiers in the German army and talked them into defecting. It was a dangerous assignment and after the war it was by sheer luck that she escaped being treated as a 'slut', shorn and tarred.

When the hostilities were over the victims of the concentration camps came home. I will never forget the sight of the long queues of thin, haggard human beings, dressed in uniform rags walking slowly through the main street of Brussels, and how for the first time in my life, I

felt such an overwhelming hatred towards the Germans that it twisted my guts.

I hadn't worked in the wards for a number of months when a call came to my outpatient clinic: 'Galperine, you must go to Casualty.' I was asked to help take care of a sudden influx of returned concentration camp inmates. Some of them were my own peers, caught by the Nazis during the occupation. We bathed their skeletal bodies, suffering from scabies. When I went home off duty, my mother offered my professional help to neighbours who had returned, barely alive, from Germany. Often there was little I could do but try to comfort their families. Most of them were terribly weak, suffering from malnutrition and the sequels of other illnesses.

As it happened I didn't nurse any Jewish concentration camps inmates. I wasn't working in the wards any longer; I only worked in the hospital wards during my first three years of training. The people my mother knew in our suburb lived nearby; they had been caught either because of their political activities or when they were sent to labour camps.

The depth of anger and revulsion towards the Nazis was burning when I witnessed that slow stream of bedraggled people while, as always, the shield of professional status protected me from intense feelings when I quietly took on a professional persona and nursed individual returned prisoners, either that one day in Casualty or in their own homes.

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I continued to attend meetings of the Communist Party, although often disappointed. Their committee seemed disorganised and I balked at painting slogans on walls. I had made friends and, while I wasn't interested in local politics, I wished to understand the ambitions of these Marxists and how their actions could influence our present government's subservience to Catholic teaching.

Life's uncoiling brought me face to face with Dolf. A friend introduced us in the melee of a crowd. I shook hands with a handsome man who held a pipe clenched between his teeth and wore Tyrolean leather shorts. I believed him to be younger than myself as he talked on, an assertive exponent of his political views, critical of the leaders in his own group. That I judged him arrogant didn't quench my curiosity, and when he suggested meeting the next day, I accepted. I was taken aback when to my question, 'What do you do?' meaning what is your profession, he had answered casually, 'Nothing,' neither embarrassed nor ashamed.

My immediate repartee had been, 'You can't possibly live that way.' He was so unlike any other men that I knew – the medical residents at Saint Peter's or my own friends. While during the war, some had rebelled against their parents' narrow-mindedness, I watched them slide back effortlessly into the secure anonymity of traditions, adopting the fairly conservative Belgian habits.

At that time Dolf cohabited with two friends and they lived untidily, dormitory-style, in a very small apartment. I visited him on my way home from work. He had started

a hobby and made skilfully inlaid wooden boxes.

Fascinated and bemused, a mysterious chemistry bubbled, a powerful solvent melted the judgmental mat on which I stood and our friendship rapidly evolved to courtship. We talked and talked, walking beside each other while the dim light played in the shadows of chestnut trees lining my street. It was so peaceful!

I discovered with joy our similar taste in books and music and the congruity of our beliefs and values. Gentle and kind, he accepted my emotional and intellectual quandaries. I had never questioned whether I was pretty or not. I wasn't interested in fashion but I admired my friends' attractive physique and their smart clothes; I saw myself as clumsy and ill-attired by comparison. Now that I experienced and trusted Dolf's tender benevolence, I abandoned self-consciousness and it was exhilarating.

I saw it as a mark of respect when he fleetingly touched my cheek or forehead when we parted. He showed remarkable restraint and his own sensuality didn't raise its head. There were no specific rules in my book of cultural mores about falling in love. In fact, I had never found any plausible explanation of what it meant to fall in love, or when one knew one was in love. Now my heart brimmed with gratitude and I blossomed. He greeted me with the warmest of smiles as soon as he saw me. Slowly my father's ghost retired to the shadows, not only meek but silent. I accepted that Dolf liked who I was and I, in return, loved him devotedly.

I copied this quote into a notebook when I was about

twenty. Jean Giono's words resonated because I carried such a severe watcher, intent on withholding permission to act freely and follow my desires. Giono wrote: 'I believed that the road could stop on this side of the earth and that at long last I had been given permission ...'

Likewise, flooded with elation, I trusted that the tides had turned, that I would be allowed the unblemished pleasure, the bliss that the flux of passion carries in early months. I unearthed fragments of Dolf's family history. His mother had died in the 1940s' exodus. There had been a train crash in France, his father suffered the amputation of one leg and his middle brother Henry had also been wounded. Later both his brothers, Silver barely fourteen and Henry twenty-two, were gassed by the Nazis.

I accepted Dolf's reticence and asked few questions about the way his brothers had been caught, where and how he lived the war years in France.

I failed to experience a deep empathy for the guilt and trauma he had endured. In my usual narcissistic way, my life, and therefore his life, started when we met.

Naively, I assumed that I would find an ally in my mother. Hadn't she, from the onset of fascism and during the war, stood as a defiant protector of the abused? Wasn't she the one who valiantly maintained that the Jews were not how the Germans painted them to be? I trusted that her heart would overflow with compassion for this poor fellow who grieved the loss of his mother and his brothers. Yes, I had been credulous when I believed that her generosity of spirit would extend to Dolf.

Well before I tried to tell her, she had noticed the young man in leather shorts who often waited across the street. ‘What is his profession?’ she asked, and that he happened to be Jewish made matters worse.

From the first time that she quizzed me, I hung bewitched on a pendulum and swung, fleeing her tormenting rage to nestle in the comfort of Dolf’s arms. Dramatic in her stance, well rehearsed in the language of melodrama, she used my father’s love as a deadly weapon. I heard every day through her mouth, how badly I had let him down. How Dolf was a scoundrel bound to take advantage of my professional achievements. How disappointed my father was in the unforeseen, unyielding infatuation that had taken hold of his daughter. My mother accused me of breaking his heart, of endangering his health, hence shortening his life (he was sixty-five at the time).

To her utter dismay, I had become deaf and blind to logic, reason and tradition which advocated allying oneself to a man of similar background, ensuring that the way ahead would be clearly delineated. Such a path, she believed, would keep her daughter safe within the family’s bosom, under their watchful eyes. But for the once gentle, obedient daughter, the do’s and don’ts of ‘love and respect your parents’ wishes’ stubbornly abandoned the tussle to until-death-do-us-part.



*Marriage 1946*

The whole saga lasted more than six months and by this time Dolf had a steady job in the manufacture of leather goods. He had trained and acquired the necessary skills before the war in his father's own business. However, my mother's loathing was such that it awoke the worst of fantasies. I would go to Dolf in fear, saying, 'They are going to go and talk to your manager.'

His response was disarmingly calm: 'I am a good worker.' If my mother's curses blemished my happiness, she too suffered and was at a loss. We were both very unhappy.

I wonder if the amnesiac blank I experience as to where I slept in my parents' house is the result of the brutal months I lived through. At the clinic where I worked, I was asked if all was well, but was unable to hang the family's washing in so foreign an attic.

Dolf and I had known each other a while when he decided to go back to France to retrieve papers, money and jewels left behind by his father. I feared for his safety; it would be a risky business. He was no longer the bearer of a Belgian identity card and needed a visa to cross the French border. I felt anxious and alone. I knew my mother's objections to our future together and guessed that she would be overjoyed had he been caught – this catastrophe would unleash the self-fulfilling prophecy that she prayed for.

A resourceful chap, he came back with mission

accomplished, and a few months later, offering me his own mother's engagement ring, he asked me to marry him. I was at work and later shared the amazingly heady excitement with my colleagues.

When I relived that lengthy episode, the grief-ridden and punishing time, I felt such a depth of resentment towards my mother that it boiled over. I sketched her with black pencils sharp as knives – a controlling, self-centred woman who boasted of my scholarly achievements, while she didn't seem to care who I was or what I craved for. My good deeds paved her saintly path when she benevolently offered my time and skills to acquaintances for her gratification. The husband she wished me to choose was to be for her own aggrandisement.

That her daughter's marriage would be to a Jew brought forth an impossible turmoil – dejection, blighted hopes, shame, the whole bag of Catholic and national prejudices kept hidden, yet so alive that it soared with destructive vindictiveness towards me.

The reality was horrid. I fought obstinately and single-handed. Both my sister and Willy, on his rare visits, sided with my parents. And I, who believed that my beloved brother was my friend and treasured the words he had written on my birthday: 'In memory of a blissful year of friendship without parallel', was deceived. Barely one and a half years later, he was pushing me into a box pasted with the message: 'Leave me in peace, do as our parents wish, they know what is good for you.'

Rachel commented: 'You are selfish.' She was fifteen

years old. What did she know of love or of me, anyhow? She rightly resented the malevolent odour leaking along my trail. As a last resort, I went to my father. He retreated into passivity. I asked, 'How can you, you are Jewish yourself?'

His words in reply were: 'Your mother suffered throughout the war; she does not want you to experience similar pain.'

What of her prejudices? What of his own feelings? Would any pretender have been acceptable, was he unconsciously utterly possessive of his daughter's heart? What of the harm perpetrated in the name of parental love!

Eventually my family accepted that my mind was made up ... I intended to marry Dolf. Two determined women had been at war; the younger one won without glory. Had my mother been able to share with me her own feelings, it may have brought us closer together and I regret the loss of so vital an opportunity. My parents had been unwilling to recall that gullible, serious, doggedly studious child, that one who gained brilliant results yet had been assessed by a shrewd professor 'as not an all-round intelligent girl.'

They had been oblivious of how desperately I watched every step, ambushed by my rigid dogmas when I craved my father's benevolence. They didn't speculate on how differently my brazen, happy-go-lucky sister and I behaved in adolescence. I was not a patch on her! 'Who is this young woman who lives in our midst?' remained the

question never asked, and if I was aware of their grief, it made no sense to me and I forgo my affection for them, our lineage and the blood ties cementing us. I disowned these feelings.

In childhood I opted to follow a single road – no mother’s love meant that my sole focus hung onto my father’s responses. Now, a lack of parental or siblings’ affection informed an easy choice – the man they refused to communicate with was the only one who held me in his attentive tenderness. Not only did he claim aloud that he loved me, but I bathed intact in his warm embrace with not one pound of flesh exacted.

In my eyes my mother had always followed her own inclination. Emancipated, she flaunted all the rules of conservative middle-class Brussels. She didn’t care about her neglected appearance, her poor housekeeping, her lack of public restraint. She disregarded her daughters’ embarrassment. We felt humiliated, ashamed at the way she dressed and voiced aloud her opinions.

Yet she too suffered from what Sartre described as Hell – being judged by outsiders, and she paid her societal dues thanks to us. She imparted value to the image her family presented the world outside our house – my father’s shirts and suits were kept spotless – my sister and I wore frocks that she remodelled skilfully – my brother’s military career remained impressive and she always let it be known throughout our neighbourhood.

Dolf became stateless during the war. Born in Berlin in 1919, his parents migrated to Belgium in 1923. He

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never set foot in Poland but it was the country his ancestors had come from and he gave his nationality as Polish. The Belgian bureaucracy set his birth place in Krakow, as good a place as any.

Thus when the marriage banns were publicly advertised for six weeks and details posted on the Town Hall walls, Constance believed that everyone in our suburb would know her shame, the tale of her accomplished daughter who had chosen to ally herself with a Polish Jew.

We had our own cards printed to announce the date of our union but were not encouraged to invite our friends. We walked to the Town Hall and back. My parents and Willy were the only witnesses; my sister refused to join us. I was proud of my Bali walking shoes and Dolf had made me a lovely handbag but I hated the ridiculous hat that my mother decreed I was to wear, a stiff turban, far from becoming. One of her acquaintances had fashioned the ugly thing and my mother's priority had been 'I can't hurt her feelings; she put in a few hours of work making your hat.' The outsiders won.

The judge took ten minutes to read aloud the marriage contract. We exchanged engraved wedding rings, the date: 30 March 1946. It was a Saturday. On our return, the flowers sent by our friends festooned the staircase and stood as a welcoming sight. If Dolf's relatives were ignored, neither was any member of my mother's family present. There were no speeches or toasts, just a few snapshots taken in the garden. There was not a single one with my mother. The simplicity of the whole affair did not

dampen my happiness and Dolf didn't mind, in fact he appeared surprised when I surreptitiously looked at my wedding ring with pride.

We went back to work the following Monday and I stepped onto a path that I stayed on with creative spirit for a number of years. I became the keeper of the hearth. Dolf voiced his appreciation of the mindfulness I paid to our décor and our meals; he meant it when he credited my efforts to – *la fée du foyer* (the house fairy); a title that my mother certainly never strove for. I received it as a compliment, as homage. We settled contentedly in a small apartment furnished very simply. Our second-hand, leather-covered chairs were our prized possession; Dolf had provided the light-tan leather and I knew a cheap upholsterer. Leather has a special association for me, especially its smell and feel.

We didn't own much, but thanks to friends we acquired a few paintings and had been given decorative pieces of pottery. It was exciting to decide freely on what we were going to eat that day, how to prepare the meal or to change the placing of objects as I wished. I rejoiced in the luxury of having more than one room of my own.



### ***Belgian and Australian culture***

The Belgian culture in the 1940s was different from that of Australia on some level yet they shared identical prejudices.

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I want to look at another facet of life where the 1940s Belgian and the modern Australian cultures went hand in hand: the inhumane labelling of pregnant unmarried girls and women in the 1940s.

In both countries, pregnancy outside marriage was looked upon harshly and the female gender was held wholly responsible for the act of intercourse when a baby was its unavoidable sequel. It is obvious that an identical breed of mermaid tantalised innocent males across the oceans at that period of history. When I attended a Melbourne seminar on sexuality in early 2000, I found it of interest that the statistics on educated adolescent girls' responses to their boyfriends were identical to those of the young pregnant girls attending my clinic in Brussels in 1948.

Seemingly, girls continued to be as gullible as ever, for I heard in the English language what my charges had told me in French more or less word for word, fifty years before. For instance, adolescent boys would regularly say, 'All my peers have a willing girlfriend ... if you love me, surely you would let me have a go ... if you don't want to, I will have to go out with someone else ... surely, you trust me.' These phrases have been repeated forever in order not to use a condom. What of the feminist revolution? Hadn't it left its mark? Nothing had changed. Had those liberated women failed to guide their own daughters?

This anecdotal evidence is a response to the anticipated surprise of Australian feminist women of the 1970s: how could I have chosen wholeheartedly to be 'the fairy

of the home'? It may sound like slavery, the conditioned habit of blind devotion to the male gender. I had grown up, and lived, in a different world. Dolf and I were familiar with the writing of existentialists, and the Belgian culture encouraged women to follow their profession. Married or single, women were principals of schools for example, and when I worked for the City Council, my salary included the bonus accorded to the head of the family. In a couple, it was paid to the higher salary earner of the two. Single women or men were equally entitled to it.

Municipal crèches were cheap and available, those who could afford childcare employed mothercraft nurses to look after their children, and paid home help was plentiful. Equally, some of my wealthier friends chose to stay home.

I accept that my own stance had been subtly infected by Catholic dogma, but my pleasure in creating a warm setting had more to do with what I had never known and often longed for. I firmly believed in equal gender responsibility and in the value and respect of teamwork, something left over from my interpretation of socialist dogmas, and I refused to aspire to what I considered the indolent life of the stay-at-home.

We stayed in Brussels for about four years, and I took on four different jobs during that period. Like many women, I faced the dilemma of balancing the exacting demands of a career, with its professional and financial rewards, and the wish to be a good enough mother.

We had begun our conjugal life in our own home

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when we were offered work in a Solidarity-subsidised institution. This was an initiative born of the urgent need to help the children of war resistance fighters. and the Belgian government had set up a boarding school in a large, luxurious and dilapidated Rococo-style mansion about one hour's journey from Brussels. The property had been impounded by the taxation department. Dolf was to be a youth leader as he had gained experience working with adolescents in the socialist movement and I was asked to take on a broad nursing-cum-mothering role, looking after the health of some thirty children whose ages varied from four to fourteen years old.

Jean and Betty, the Principals of Le Domaine des Cailloux, were graduates from the Jean Jacques Rousseau Institute in Geneva. The biographical book, *My father Bertrand Russell*, written by his daughter Katherine Tait, brought vivid recollections of our 1946 experience. Jean was 'a Bertrand Russell' when it came to women and I couldn't disguise my contempt when he flirted unashamedly with one of the young teachers. His wife, a warm and intelligent woman, tried to convince me that his conduct was within the norm. She stated that, as their union hinged upon her accepting his behaviour, she made a conscious choice. She loved him.

They had similar ambitions and hopes to those of Bertrand and Dora Russell although they addressed themselves to a very different population. Both couples nonetheless wanted to create and run a progressive school. Likewise, they found it particularly difficult to

give their own children the uniqueness of their parental care and wisdom. In the case of Jean and Betty, their ten-year-old offspring was caught not only in the net of their own undigested theories, but they felt duty-bound to be stricter with him.

It had been a mistake to accept these positions. It was much too early a change in our marital journey. We had barely experienced the bliss of waking up each morning in the legalised state of togetherness and I hadn't had time to establish my priorities, nor gained the rewards of a devoted home-maker. We took the wrong leap and didn't choose wisely where we were to land. Living as a couple amidst an organised boarding school's routine – with all these witnesses around, wasn't for me. I expected a regular daily feed of Dolf's attention. The need to be reassured that I was loved and entitled hadn't disappeared. The initial pathology only changed its habitat; the hungry baby I carried hadn't been comforted to satiation by a wedding ring.

Dolf and Jean, two preposterous, egotistical males, started to look unkindly upon each other. Dolf was not prepared to accept the directives of a leader he didn't respect, and Jean not only stood as the head of the institution, he also wanted to be recognised as such. We stayed there for less than a year.

