

Six: Sex and Sin

It may seem a strange thing to say, but at the age of nine or ten I had no idea what 'sex' meant, and indeed may not by then have even heard the term. 'Gender' I did meet: it was a term used in one of our English Grammar textbooks in Grades Five or Six. I learned that there were two genders, 'masculine' and 'feminine' and I delighted in learning off by heart lists of matching terms set out in the book: king and queen, duke and duchess, earl and countess, marquis and marchioness, abbot and abbess, prior and prioress and so on. These were, however, just words to me, tricky terminology which I enjoyed grasping quickly so that I could score top marks in English tests.

I saw and read about and heard of people performing various roles (priest, bishop, nun, angel, father, mother, train driver, soldier, sailor, airman, etc.) dressed in various ways (trousers, skirts, uniform, priestly vestments, the angel's toga etc.) but was never told that I might aspire to some lifestyles and some forms of dress, though not others. I was constantly being asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, yet did not know that boys were supposed to do some things, and girls other things. Although the first three years of my schooling were co-educational, Kilbreda was essentially a convent and girls' school, where boys were accepted only up to Grade Two, and where both in the classroom

and in the playground boys and girls were in fact kept apart. I never wondered why and accepted it as simply one of the many incomprehensible rules imposed by adults. So the children I played with were always boys, and none of them ever, at least in the primary grades, raised the subject of sex or told jokes about sex or proposed any sort of remotely sexual game or experimentation.

From as early an age as I can remember I was attracted by beauty ... a beautiful countryside, picture, house, cake, piece of material, item of clothing, book, jewel, person. On the other hand, I certainly learned to value a person for the beauty of character before I became interested in the person's physical beauty. I loved my family and aunt and maternal grandmother and our maid Vera for themselves, without any consideration of their appearance. In retrospect, however, I can see that this love of beauty was unusual in a boy. It seems to have replaced any interest in things mechanical or sporting or practical. I was given an Indian tent and a cowboy's hat and pistol one Christmas but quickly found them boring. A cricket set of bat, ball and three stumps fared no better, even with my father making the effort to find time to play cricket with me in the backyard. I never had, or wanted, a pair of football boots or running spikes and really had no interest at all in which team beat which at school or on Saturday afternoon in the big league.

The year before my father died, when I was about fifteen, I began to go to an occasional football match on a Saturday afternoon with my father. He more often spent Saturday afternoon at the races with my mother and I now suspect that these trips to the football with me may have been linked to my parents' perception that I was entering puberty and needed some male bonding

and male role models. Vera knitted me a scarf in the purple and gold colours of the local team and Dad and I would walk to the football ground and sit or stand with the crowd of local supporters. The visiting team was often jeered and the umpire was not infrequently booed. Dad of course never took part in that sort of behaviour, so neither did I. He had played football for St Pat's in Ballarat and I think he actually enjoyed watching these games. Having never really played and knowing virtually nothing about the game, I was bored stiff although I did like being there with my Dad and tried to appear interested. I did, however, discover an emerging interest in the individual players, in their physical prowess and especially in their physical appearance, their trim bodies and muscular thighs and in some cases their good looks. I think that my idea of the perfect male body grew out of these afternoons at the 'footy'.

When I was twelve or so years old our Form Master at St Kevin's had puzzled me (and perhaps others) by one day devoting the entire Christian Doctrine lesson to a talk about what he called 'wet dreams' and 'nocturnal emissions'. As I had not by then experienced the phenomenon I literally did not know what he was talking about. I think he summed up by saying that it was a natural bodily function, that it usually started to occur in boys at around age twelve or thirteen, that we should not be worried by it, that it could be quite pleasurable, that we should never seek to bring it on (that would be a sin of 'self-abuse') ... and that we should not discuss the subject with our classmates in the playground after the lesson. None of my schoolmates did raise the subject afterwards and I continued in my state of ignorance until one day some months later.

And so it was that my very first experience of sex involved

sex with animals ... not that I really began my sex life with a burst of bestiality, sometimes joked about as a novelty for the more depraved urban dwellers or as a desperate substitute for lonely shepherds ... but simply that it involved the family cat. A well fed and not very athletic 'tom' known as His Highness, he was, however, neither the victim of, nor even knowing participant in, the scene (he had, after all, been 'cut' at a tender age).

I had just returned from a family outing to the beach and was still in my damp swimming trunks. My father had parked the car safely in the garage and I was following the others across the garden to the house for a shower and change when I espied His Highness curled up on the garden seat. Already last in the queue for the bathroom, I decided to wait in the garden for a while and to play with him. I sat down beside him, picked him up, put him on my lap, and started to pat him. His Highness began to purr happily and soon started, as cats do, to knead the lap it was sitting on. Some cat psychologists say that this harks back to kittenhood when the contented kitten kneaded its mother's belly to extract more milk from her nipples. In this case, however, what His Highness was kneading was not his mother's tummy, not Great-Aunt Maud's lap, but my penis and testicles, thinly covered by a wisp of damp swimsuit ... and what he extracted was not his mother's milk. To my surprise, my penis started to stiffen and extend, pushing against the fabric of my togs and even risking an encounter with His Highness' claws. The sensation was strange but pleasurable ... and grew more pleasurable until my penis was bigger than I had ever seen it and so stiff and so swollen that it seemed to actually burst, spraying sticky whitish goo over me. What on earth was going on? ... and then my Form Master at school and his little talk on nocturnal emissions and self-abuse

came to mind. Is that what had just happened? Could you have a nocturnal emission in the afternoon? The time of day involved seemed unlikely to be critical to the description of the act, and indeed it was already evening, almost *nocte*, and this certainly was an 'emission' and certainly a good deal of pleasure had been experienced by both me and the cat. In the cat's case His Highness' involvement in the crime had really been unwitting if not involuntary, and the burden of guilt, if there was any, undoubtedly fell on my shoulders. What should I do? Whom should I ask? Whom should I tell? I began to wonder if perhaps it was after all just some sort of freak accident and had nothing to do with nocturnal emissions, self-abuse and sin. If it never happened again then it probably was just an accident. If I could repeat the experience, with or without the help of His Highness, then perhaps there was a connection with the Forbidden Pleasures and I would have to discuss it with somebody.

Pushing His Highness aside I stood up, swinging my beach towel over my shoulder and letting one end fall loosely in front to cover, as best I could, the telltale wet patch on my bathers, and went inside for my turn at the shower. With calls from the kitchen to 'hurry up in there, tea's ready', I had no time to try to repeat the experience but I did notice that as long as I thought about doing so my penis persisted in swelling slightly and looking reddish and thickish in a way I had never previously known. And it seemed a bit longer. And it sort of felt good ...

That night, after kissing my parents goodnight, saying my prayers by the bedside and climbing into bed, I turned out the light and settled down to a bit of experimenting under the bedclothes. In no time at all, just thinking about the idea and merely touching my penis produced the swelling and stiffening

so pleasurable in the afternoon, and then I found that a couple of rubs with my fingers brought on the emission of the whitish goo, accompanied by an indescribably intense and good feeling of pleasure and release and relief. This was then followed, alas, by what the novelist François Mauriac called *l'antique tristesse*³⁴ which almost inevitably quickly follows orgasm, the sense of knowing that something wonderful had just ceased to be. As the song so rightly says:

*Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment,
Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie!*³⁵

I got my handkerchief from under my pillow and cleaned up the sticky mess on the bedclothes and on my pyjamas, threw the handkerchief under the bed to be collected in the morning and taken to the laundry basket when an opportunity to do so unobserved arose ... and quickly fell asleep.

So that is when I became a great sinner, enjoying the pleasures of masturbation almost every day, often several times a day, and then heading off to Confession every Saturday so that I would be able to go to Mass and Communion with a clean slate and pure soul on Sunday morning. Each week I would make a great effort not to start again but rarely held my resolve beyond Monday night. It now seems surprising to me that my parents never said anything about sex education to me, and I can only suppose that they had 'passed the buck' to the school or else that they regarded puberty as a natural phenomenon that I should be left to discover for myself. Given my father's reasonably firm religious convictions, I suspect that the former was his view and that he endorsed the school's advice that masturbation was a sin ... though perhaps, given his medical training, not a very serious one and more of a bad habit (like biting one's finger nails)! My

mother, on the other hand, may well have taken the latter view and I greatly doubt that she saw masturbation as sinful or as a serious problem. One day she surprised me in the very act, down in the privacy of the woodshed, and she retreated with an 'Oh, you're in here!' faster than I could stuff my cock and clothes back into my trousers. Whether she told my father about the incident I don't know ... it was never mentioned by anyone, and after the initial shock of being discovered, I continued with my pleasure-seeking, though probably a little more carefully and discreetly.

The strange thing is that by the end of secondary school, all I knew about sex was that masturbation was of course free and was fun but was, alas, the sin of self-abuse. I never wondered whether girls also could masturbate, had no idea as to how the female genitalia differed from that of males, had never been told about procreation and the 'birds and the bees' and, having grown up in the city away from the enlightening behaviour of farm animals, I knew nothing about intercourse between male and female. I had never wondered why my parents slept in the same bed and had never wondered or asked where we children had come from. In my all-boys secondary school, none of my schoolmates ever discussed sex in my hearing, and never told jokes about sex. While I kissed both of my parents goodnight every evening and my female relatives on meeting them, these were chaste little kisses on the cheek or forehead, and I knew nothing about the thrills of kissing on the mouth ... playing around with girls was never discussed in my gang of school friends. I can remember being rather bored at the cinema when romantic interludes appeared in films, and when Cary Grant worked his way up to kissing his leading lady on the lips, I used to wish they'd hurry up and get back to the main story of the film. At that time, Hollywood adhered to

a fairly strict code of censorship as far as sex was concerned and there was never anything to indicate that passionate kissing was a prelude to even more pleasurable activity. It was, I think, referred to as the 'one foot on the floor policy': petting and pashing were permitted between the stars of the film (heterosexual stars, of course: *pace* Cary Grant and Rock Hudson et al.) provided they remained clad and, if reclining on couch or bed, kept one foot on the floor. Thus far and no further! And yet I sensed that there was some sort of sexual activity engaged in by men and perhaps by women (but not by my own parents, of course!) and that self-abuse was a sin and a bad habit because it in some way frustrated proper sexual function. But I had no idea of what 'proper sexual function' actually was. It now seems extraordinary to me that it was possible in an Australian city in the 1950s for a boy to reach his teens without any knowledge of sex and to then be taught just one thing about it ... that it was pleasurable but sinful.

The year after my father died, when I turned seventeen and my brother thirteen, I asked one of the senior teachers whom I most respected to explain the 'facts of life' to my younger brother. 'Killer', Br Kilmartin, was I think a bit surprised and so I explained that as our father had died just before Peter presumably reached puberty, I thought someone should step in and explain things ... and that I felt unable to. Killer rather reluctantly, I think, agreed to my request, although I never knew whether he actually did speak to Peter, and I never asked Peter or discussed sex with him. (I do feel, however, that Peter grew up with a much more sensible approach to sex than I. My initial reaction to later hearing that he, his wife and their young children swam naked together in their swimming pool was one of surprise and disapproval, while I now see such a relaxed attitude in the home to the human body as a

very sensible way of gradually introducing children to the facts of life.) What was my motivation in asking Killer to explain things to my brother? I now think that I had two intentions: one was to try to spare him the guilt and confusion that I was experiencing; and the other was, I think, the faint hope that I might through some side effect learn the facts of life myself!

The facts of life were not, however, explained to me until I was part way through my second year at university, and then it was done by a friend only a year or so older. At last I learned that the man pushed his erect penis into the woman's vagina (I suspect I nodded knowingly, although I was not at all sure what a vagina was or just why a man would want to do this), shooting his ejaculate up the passageway towards her womb, where it could fertilise the woman's eggs and make a baby. It all sounded more like hard work than fun. So *that* was proper sexual function!

'How does the baby get out of the womb after the nine months of growth?' I remember asking ... and there my informant was able only to speculate that 'it was probably the same way as it got in'. This conversation took place before the days of television and the enlightenment generally available nowadays through that medium, and perhaps explains how I could grow to adulthood without ever really knowing the details of the processes of conception and birth.

Thirty or more years later I was talking with my Aunt Nell, then approaching 90, about her days as an art student in Melbourne. When she had first come to the city from her home in the country, at the tender age of twenty, she had stayed with a great-uncle and his wife, then living in an outer suburb. But after a few months of travelling by bus and train into and out from the city every day, she got her parents' approval to find 'digs' closer

to the city centre and the National Gallery School of Art in the CBD. She somehow or other was put in touch with a family living in a very posh part of South Yarra on the edge of Toorak, a family where the husband's business interests had declined so far as to convince his wife that to save the day she should take in one or two very respectable 'paying guests'. The family home was large and comfortable, Nell said, close to the Botanical Gardens and to the stop of the tram running directly to the Gallery School at the top of Swanston Street. The arrangement seemed to suit everybody and so Nell moved in. Nell added that in her second term at the Art School she had become quite keen on a young chap in her class and apparently got to the stage of talking about him with her landlady, who tended to 'mother' her. She then amazed me by saying that it was the landlady who had at that stage explained to her the facts of life, 'how babies are made', as Nell put it. 'Wouldn't you think that Mum would have explained all that to me before letting me come to live alone in the city?' she added. I could only agree, not having realised until then that my grandmother might have had some shortcomings in her role as a mother and some serious inhibitions as regards sex. And what about grandma's own mother, my valiant Great-Grandmother Fanny? Had she explained the facts of life to her daughters?

She had had eleven children, and my grandmother seven. What was it about British and Australian society that so inhibited parents in their dealings with their own children? Are those inhibitions now a thing of the past? Has the recent influx of migrants from the even more inhibited and socially quite feudal Middle Eastern Muslim world worsened the problem in this area of social behaviour? I found Nell's little story quite sad; she had apparently fallen in love with her classmate and, thanks to the

timely advice from her landlady, she had not let the relationship go too far too fast for, by the end of the third term, the classmate had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, from which he died within a few months. Nell contracted the disease from him (she smilingly explained that they used to suck on the same pencils and paintbrush handles in art classes). Her coughing and pallor were immediately noticed by my mother when Nell visited her at St Vincent's Hospital and Nell was straightaway shipped back home to the country. Her parents were told that the only chance of recovery would be for Nell to keep to her bed for six months, the bed to be put out on the verandah in the fresh air, a special diet to be closely followed and a program of breathing and chest exercises to be strictly followed. To everyone's amazement Nell did exactly as the doctors ordered (proof, according to my mother, of her incredible willpower), made a full recovery, outlived all her siblings and died, ever celibate, on her 92nd birthday.