

HOME, GROWING UP CATHOLIC

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"Home, growing up Catholic" is about a journey into the past, so as to better understand the present and be able to move into the future more easily.

The first leap came when as a creative Arts Masters student at the University of Wollongong, I was doing preliminary research into the word HOME.

I was coming up with a lot of information on domesticity, physical characteristics i.e. house/garden, social problems connected with ... none of which I was interested in pursuing. I wanted to explore the historical/social meanings of the word, to know the essence of the word HOME.

I began by talking to people about their thoughts and feelings on the word and found the majority of the responses focused on external qualities, through metaphors like "home is where you hang your hat", "home is where the heart is", great for them, totally unsatisfactory for me. It was suggested by one of the lecturers that I start doing some memory work and by looking at my own experiences of HOME I might better understand the implications of the word.

Initially the memories were like single photographs found in the bottom of a drawer, interesting but not so important. Like photographs, the memories when looked at as a whole, started to form a pattern that explained clearly my interest in HOME. It became important to present the story not as a narrative, but as a tableaux of memories/images, not as an adult remembering, but as a child feeling. To be able to create images of themselves, to tell the story, I created the Little Girl. She comes from remembered haircuts, old photographs and the desire to remain incognito. This had the effect of taking the story, out of the first person and moving it into the public arena, and hopefully being more accessible to the viewer/reader. The images are all from the Little Girl's perspective as she relates the story in the fragmented style of memory.

The images explore the fragments of early childhood years spent with twenty other girls of varying ages, family contact limited to school holidays, one Sunday a month and weekly letters within the parameters

of a Catholic country boarding school, with women who having been called to a Religious vocation had given their lives to the service of God, only to become caretakers of other women's children.

The Little Girl lived an ordinary life with her parents and sister in a small country town. Until she was four years of age, at which time her mother went to hospital with TB. They did not see each other again for four years and the Little Girl and her sister went to live in the city with their grandparents.

The Little Girl was a wilful type, asked to leave her first school because of her unruly behaviour, running away from the second, her grandparents couldn't cope. Her father having gone to work in another country town decided she should go to boarding school in the town where he worked. The boarding school catered for girls whose parents lived either on country properties or in smaller towns. At not quite five years of age, boarding school brought for the Little Girl a world of regimentation she had not known before. There were bells for everything, to get up in the morning, to eat, to talk, to go to school, to play. All the girls slept, ate and played together. School uniforms were worn six days a week, hair washed every Saturday, extra food like cakes and lollies were shared. The Little Girl's identity became smashed in ritual, and she became a child of God, and her Mother figure Mary, the mother of God.

Among the Little Girl's first memories are those of a fence that ran around the church and the boarding school. She spent hours at this fence waiting for her father, sometimes he would come on a borrowed bicycle with some lollies or marbles.

The Little Girl soon learnt that wanting to have something of your own was extremely selfish. Unselfish people were people like the Saints, who "who despised the folly and vanity of the world and longed for death, in the hereafter". None of whom the Little Girl was told would appreciate the Kewpie Doll, she had received from her father. A celluloid doll with celluloid hair, it had a net skirt which formed a circle at the back of the doll. The nuns said it was rude, and would make Our Lady and the Saints blush. The Little Girl didn't care, her father had given it to her, she didn't have to share it. She loved the doll.

Holy Cards became an important part of the Little Girl's life. These were available at one penny each. When it came to choosing between a lolly and a Holy Card, the Holy Card always won. Only selfish girls would choose a lolly.

The Little Girl loved the school holidays. She usually stayed with

one of her aunts. All her clothes would be packed into a big brown suitcase. Taxis would convey the girls to the railway station. The Little Girl always hoped she wouldn't return the following term.

In the grounds of the boarding school were fruit trees. The Little Girl noticed a nice ripe peach, her teeth had barely broken the peach's skin, when sounds of screaming and gnashing of teeth erupted ... The peach was being kept for the Reverend Mother's Feast Day.

Prayer and Penance became an integral part of the Little Girls life. She learnt to pray for what she wanted, needed or had lost. Prayer was not something to be hurried and was to be said often. She woke up to prayer every morning, said it before and after each meal, before school, after school, on going to sleep every night and at every spare moment in-between. She prayed for herself, her parents, her teachers, the souls in purgatory and the conversion of the world to Catholicism.

When she was seven years of age the Little girl made her First Confession and First Holy Communion. This was an important step for the Little Girl as she was now able to participate in the Churches rites of the forgiveness of sin and receiving Christ's body through the communion. These rites also brought a new responsibility for the Little Girl to keep herself in a 'state of grace'. This could only be achieved by not committing a sin or seeking forgiveness. Sins came in two sizes, mortal or venial. Mortal sins were things like murder or missing Mass on Sunday, venial sins were things like hitting your sister or cheating on your spelling test. The Little Girl was aware of not being in a state of grace most of the time, and hoped to survive the short distance between life and death, emphasised as being like the thread on a spider's web until the following Saturday, when she would be able to confess her sins, seek forgiveness and do her penance.

The Little Girl left the boarding school when she was eight years of age, when her mother had come home from hospital. They were a family once again. The Little Girl was happy some times, there were long periods when she was miserable. For five long years they battled it out, her parents wanting her to be a success, by being 'good', by conforming, the Little Girl wanting to be left alone.

At thirteen years of age the Little Girl returned to boarding school. It was supposed to be as a punishment for her misbehaviour. The Little Girl was extremely happy. Leaving her family was also leaving behind failure.

The Little Girl could not fit into the traditional infrastructure of home, as defined by society and her parents, as she had no history of this. An individual raised within a family unit, learns to rely on that

unit for sustenance, an individual raised in an institution, learns to take what they need from many people, relying on no one familiar, getting sustenance for themselves.

The Little Girl survived and thrived in the communal atmosphere of the boarding school. While there was little or no personal space, privacy was not what the Little Girl needed. She needed and got acceptance. The nuns at this school were women who recognised the energy the Little Girl possessed, encouraging her to use her strengths, while being aware of her weaknesses. The Little Girl left school ready to believe in herself.

The Little Girl got her first job in an office, worked in a shop for awhile, returned to institutional life via the nursing profession, met and married her handsome prince.

They met for the first time at a dance, the second time on a harbour cruise, the third time they played tennis together. Ten days later they were engaged, two and a half months later they were married. Their children will be giving them a surprise 25th Wedding Anniversary Party in 1994.

Becoming a wife and mother was easy, being them was something else, as the Little Girl had very little experience of role modelling. The Little Girl knew that wives and mothers were expected to clean the house, provide meals and be there in times of crisis. She would visit friends who were able to have all the house work finished by breakfast time. She always thought she should be interested in doing these things, she just couldn't, she felt a failure.

The Little Girl remembered early experience of 'Home', was being with people, sharing thoughts and ideas, fighting, having fun. Her main worry was that her children and husband would feel alienated by their friends because of her inability to be a 'good' housekeeper and mother. Then one day she overheard one of her children's friends say how much she like Little Girl's house, it's so nice she said, you have pictures on the walls and lots of things to touch and play with.

This is the Little Girls HOME. It is a very visual and tactile place, very little gets thrown out or put away. One can discover piles of newspapers in her studio that are seven and eight years old. The books are three deep on the bookshelves waiting for new bookcases to be built, all horizontal space in use. The front door is always open.

My research has led me think that the essence of HOME lay in the roots and thoughts of the thinker. My roots lay not in the traditional metaphors and myths of sweetness or happiness, but seek to connect HOME with the language of forgiveness, acceptance, guilt, laughter,

conflict, fun, sharing and communication.

HOME is not where I live, but where they understand me.

Sydney