

Chapter 2

The mystery

The following weeks, occupied with settling in, learning the routine and rules of the convent community, and concentrating on the daily prayer and instruction, demanded the close attention of the postulants. Demanding as it was, it was hardly a burden for Aine's fervour. In addition to the joy of the daily routine of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, rosary, Bible meditation and the singing of the hours, there was the relief that the voice and the eyes were no longer tormenting her. Perhaps the rigour of the formation process drew her attention away from their still lingering presence. She did not know; she did not have time to consider that possibility because Mother Cecilia, showing an unnerving insight into the character of each of the young women, focused her stern reprimands unerringly on their individual faults. Aine was embarrassed to find herself continually and vigorously called to attention. But in contrast to others who could not hide feelings of victimization, she had no complaint; she was well aware of her tendency to isolate herself in her thoughts and nodded meekly in the face of the reprimands.

'What are you going to do, pray tell, when you are faced with thirty restless fourteen-year-old girls,' demanded the postulant mistress of her in the middle of one class. 'Unruly girls will gobble up a timid indecisive teacher.'

'Yes, Reverend Mother.'

'Then stop dreaming. Keep your mind on it.'

As recompense Aine was given the shared responsibility of organizing the kitchen stores, a painstaking menial task that took much concentration and co-operation. She set to work without murmur, but was unable to douse the spark of inward rebellion against the brakes put on her free-flowing contemplation. When the kitchen group left their tasks to go to the chapel she was ashamed of her feelings of relief, which disturbed the consolation she got from losing herself in her prayers in the manner she imagined of the religious sister. As an indication that she was not yet submitting whole heartedly to the Rule, she was next

given the job of ringing the bell that signalled the start of the community's daily tasks. Again, she accepted the instruction meekly, but felt the heightened pressure of having to concentrate continually on what was going on around her.

Aine knew she had no reason to feel singled out. Each of the postulants was subject to bouts of attention being drawn humiliatingly to their faults. Virginia did not escape, she least of all. Mother Cecilia constantly challenged her. Whether it was about religious instruction, the Rule or the routine of the convent, Virginia was called upon to show what she knew – or rather what she did not know. The postulant mistress, with barefaced intention, questioned her unrelentingly about Church teaching that was evidently the domain of the professional theologian. Even matters of obscure canon law were served up for Virginia's embarrassment.

'See, you don't know everything, do you, Miss Pearson?' Mother Cecilia would say airily when Virginia failed to give the right answer. 'A little reflection and a little humility before you open your too often exercised mouth would not be astray.'

'Yes, Reverend Mother, I will pay attention.'

'See that you do.'

Aine was embarrassed for her new friend. She thought Virginia the most mature of the postulants, besides the most knowledgeable. Certainly she was self-assured and ready to air her views, but she also showed sympathy and understanding for the feelings of others. Apart from the first day when she aggressively put Margaret and her friends on the spot, her manner was usually friendly and considerate. She sought Aine out each recreational period, offering support and comfort if it was needed, at the same time being careful not to give the impression she was excluding others from her conversation. There was one occasion when her thoughtfulness truly impressed Aine.

From time to time Rose Lewis's face unaccountably turned a deathly pale, sometimes followed by violent bouts of vomiting. Being a quiet gentle woman who never complained or gave any indication of disagreeableness, she made light of these occasions, politely brushing aside all solicitations about her health. Virginia tried to question her about its cause, but gentle Rose smiled and told her not to worry. She would get over it.

'There is something wrong with her,' commented Virginia, one day after lunch, as the postulants, some recoiling with their hands over their mouths, watched Rose being sick over the garden outside the refectory.

To everyone's astonishment Mother Cecilia immediately took to castigating her. 'I have told you before,' she said sharply, 'you have to learn

to rise above your dislikes, to discipline your body. If you cannot overcome small things, how are you going to manage the big things? You will be helped to conquer your inclinations. Now go and get a bucket and clean up your mess.'

Virginia looked in amazement first at Mother Cecilia and then at Rose who good-naturedly nodded her head. 'So that's it,' she whispered to Aine. 'What is it you don't like?' she said to Rose later. But Rose would not say anything. 'Then I will find out.'

Rose was violently ill after dinner three days in succession.

'You have a dairy intolerance, don't you?' said Virginia at the first opportunity.

'Please...,' said Rose, unsteady on her feet and trying to put a finger to her mouth. '...silence.'

'You can't do anything about that. I know from experience. I had a couple of children in one class...'

'Please don't say anything,' Rose pleaded.

'We'll see.'

That evening Mother Jerome appeared in the postulant community room, chatting briefly with each postulant before stepping aside with Mother Cecilia. Over the following days, Rose revived and colour returned to her cheeks.

'It was the cheese,' said Virginia. 'She could just manage everything else except the blessed macaroni cheese dish. The cook seems to have a preference for cheese dishes.'

'Do you think Mother Cecilia will be happy that you went to Mother Jerome?' Kay Burgess, one of the mature young women, asked.

'But I didn't. I only mentioned it to Mother Cecilia.'

Virginia did not care about the source of Mother Jerome's information. She was happy with the result, disregarding the heat that her interference would inevitably bring. However kind and courageous Virginia had been, though, Aine was not so sure that Rose was entirely happy with her intervention. As Aine and Virginia expected, the wrath of the postulant mistress came down hard on the outspoken teacher. The air became so thick with sarcasm and reprimand that one could have cut it away in slabs, commented Virginia. Aine could not help thinking it unfair of Mother Cecilia to target her as often as she did, especially when she caught Margaret glancing with an expression of satisfaction at Elizabeth and Jannie. Eventually she felt strongly enough to make mention of the harsh treatment.

'Oh, it's all right,' said Virginia. 'I know I am a little outspoken. I've always had a big mouth. I need to keep in mind that I have to listen to others and not seem so sure of my opinions. It's part of the process of

discernment. Our postulant mistress is more insightful than one would think.’

‘But you are right most of the time. Or so it seems to me.’

‘You are too kind,’ said Virginia, amused. ‘I do make an effort not to open my mouth without being sure of what I am talking about.’ They were standing near the ridge and looking down at the glassy calm water of the river. ‘But it is not really about what I know. It’s about pride. Pride opens the gate to the devil.’ She laughed softly. ‘There I go again, preaching away...but it is important for me to know of the temptations pride will lead me to. You, my dear girl, feel for me because you don’t know what pride is.’

It was the first time that Virginia had openly expressed her affection. It warmed Aine and she was grateful.

‘Let’s walk a little,’ Virginia said, seeming to read her thoughts.

They walked along the ridge away from the other postulants, most of whom were sitting and chatting happily on the benches. Aine glanced back and saw Margaret’s eyes following them. She felt a sudden chill, and then unsteadiness. She reached for Virginia’s arm.

‘What is it? Are you all right?’

‘Yes...yes, I just felt a little unsteady.’

Aine let go of Virginia’s arm. She was inclined to look back again, but resisted. They walked on.

‘There’s something about you,’ said Virginia, at length. ‘I don’t know what it is. And I don’t think that it’s ordinary anxiety you are suffering from. Are you going to tell me what it’s about?’

‘I don’t know myself.’

‘Well, what caused that sudden apprehension?’

‘Apprehension?’

‘Yes, you had a look of apprehension. Come on, Aine, tell me. It may help to talk about it.’

‘I looked around and saw Margaret McGuigan looking at us and for some inexplicable reason I felt odd,’ she said, giving in reluctantly to Virginia’s insistence.

Virginia looked back. The group at the benches had dispersed. Margaret and her friends were climbing the steps to the next parapet. They approached an older nun who was tending the rose garden. The nun, wearing garden gloves and protected by a beige apron, looked up when they were beside her. It appeared that Margaret wanted to engage her in conversation. Elizabeth and Jannie looked on while the nun stood upright with her arms hanging beside her, listening to the young postulant. She raised the hand holding the secateurs in a quick gesture before turning her attention again to the roses. Virginia frowned, appeared to

be on the point of saying something, but then turned and continued walking, holding Aine's arm for some moments before she realized what she was doing.

'Has that happened before,' said Virginia, releasing Aine's arm, 'I mean that reaction to Margaret?'

'No.'

'What happened on that first morning?'

'I told you. It was a bad dream.'

They stopped at the boundary fence. Virginia turned and began to walk back. 'I won't ask any more. I will leave you to tell me if you want. You can trust me.'

Aine was eager to thank her for her concern, and did so. But Virginia appeared not to hear.

'Elizabeth Parker and Jannie de Kam have not escaped Mother Cecilia's reprimands – Jannie in particular. But have you noticed that Margaret, apart from a little scolding in the beginning, has increasingly gotten away with her perverse behaviour, now avoiding what most of us suffer? It's as if the postulant mistress has become blind...or stumped by her behaviour. I mean, she seems unable to pick Margaret's faults any more. I really should not be making any comment. But your reaction just then...'

'Margaret adjusts her behaviour depending on who she is with.'

'You are more attentive than I thought.'

'I could not help noticing some occasions...'

'Others seem to have missed it...if that's it.' They arrived back at the benches. Virginia sat down, apart from the other young women. 'Is it really true that you had no boyfriends before coming here?'

'Yes.'

'None at all?'

'None. It's as I said. I was always drawn to religious life.'

'But you must have experienced attention – from boys, I mean. They can be insistent, you know. And looking the way you do...'

'I discouraged any attention,' said Aine, looking away. 'It was fortunate that my father had a business that I could work in. That relieved me of being rude.'

'You don't like people talking about your appearance, do you?'

'No, it's the most impermanent part of us. It is not worth more than passing attention.'

'Most girls don't think that way. For some, the discovery of their beauty is like an epiphany.'

Aine was reminded of the disturbing occasions she had to discourage male attention, and in her reluctance to talk about her appearance

and male attention could not think of anything to say.

‘Well, if you did not respond to people of the male sort, I certainly did,’ Virginia said lightly. ‘I went through the usual routine that girls go through – and enjoyed it. It was all very innocent, though. My parents saw that I was supervised all along the line. I mixed with the boys at the Catholic Youth Club, good fellows mostly. I even had several steady boyfriends before I eventually found one that I really fell in love with.’

‘You fell in love?’

Virginia laughed. ‘Don’t say that as if you think me incapable of it!’

‘Oh no, I don’t mean that. I mean, that I thought, seeing that you want to be a nun...of course, it was silly of me to...’

‘No need to explain. And don’t take me so seriously. Yes, I fell in love with a really nice... I don’t think a girl could wish for anyone better than my Philip...as he was then. We were engaged to be married.’ She shrugged her shoulders, her expression and mood suddenly changing.

‘What happened?’

‘I told you. I picked up a copy of the *Confessions* and broke his heart,’ she said abruptly.

It was the first time in those weeks that Virginia seemed on the point of losing her composure. Aine felt her pain, but out of respect refrained from making any comment. There was silence for a minute or so. Then Aine put her hand gently on Virginia’s arm. Virginia glanced at her hand.

‘I had no intention of talking about it,’ she said in a whisper. ‘That will teach me to be nosey, won’t it? And let things creep up on me.’

Aine smiled sympathetically and took her hand away. After a few moments Virginia took a deep breath.

‘Philip was starting a promising career in academia. He took his faith seriously...did all the right things in courting me. I had a glory box...the day I took off the engagement ring and gave it to him was the most painful day of my life. I cannot describe the scene. If he had only been angry, it would have been bad enough. But he looked at me with incomprehension as I tried to explain, and then said nothing when I finished, at least not immediately. It all took place in my parents’ living room with my parents waiting in the kitchen. Can you imagine the scene?’

‘No, I cannot.’

‘After staring at me for what seemed many painful moments, he put the ring on the coffee table and said that the ring had bound his heart forever. Bound his heart forever! What a time to be poetically vivid! He told me to keep it. He would not be giving such a ring to anyone else.’ She paused. ‘That was it – three months ago. I didn’t see him after that. My parents contacted him and asked him to be patient – they were just as confounded with my decision as everyone else – I was certain to

reflect, they said. But he told them that he knew me well enough to know that I had not made the decision lightly.' She shrugged again. 'That was it. And here I am.' Another pause. 'You were right to discourage male attention. It saved you the heartache of hurting someone so deeply.'

'I was not conscious of such things.'

'But you want to be a bride of Christ.'

'Yes,' said Aine, not understanding.

'It's about your maidenhood.'

'My maidenhood?'

Virginia hesitated, caught for a moment by the piercing blue eyes and their wondering expression. 'I said Philip did all the right things in courting me. I am twenty-three and Philip is twenty-seven. There are occasions...I wanted...on our wedding night, you see. It was my special gift to him...a symbol of our permanent commitment. He understood...did not put any pressure on me. Then my heart was stirred by the infinite love of Jesus, a love that demanded as much love as I had to give. Do you see? My response was to give all that I had to give...my maidenhood as a spiritual gift.'

'I had not thought of that,' repeated Aine, feeling foolish.

'A young woman of twenty-three is ready to think about it, I assure you. Young women should know what they're giving up before they decide on religious life. They need to be tested. There are girls here...they would have done better to have waited a while. Well, you know what I think. Sticking doggedly to religious life without a vocation could cause untold damage to the individual and the community.'

'You are thinking of Margaret, of course.'

'And her friends. There are some others too, but Margaret and company are a real worry. I doubt whether they have a real appreciation of the symbolism of a ceremony centred on the "Brides of Christ". You can imagine the mocking comments from an insolent girl who does not understand.'

'I have thought too lightly about it, too,' said Aine. 'I have not given enough thought to the significance...'

'A fault of our education.'

'Perhaps. Perhaps I'm at fault.'

'Some of those young women are going to feel foolish all dressed up in lacy brides gowns, if they have no idea of the symbolism. I hope they were listening to Mother Jerome. I have a feeling, though, that Margaret will only think it joke in the long run.' She stopped. 'There, I've been gratuitously airing my thoughts again – and being uncharitable this time, which is worse. Mother Cecilia has reason, doesn't she?'

‘Why do you think Margaret is here, then, said Aine, ‘if she thinks it joke and treats rules as something to be broken?’

‘I’m not quite sure. Margaret is an intelligent young woman, far smarter than her two companions. That and her temperament is a bad combination. I think it’s a question of maturity – spiritual maturity, if you want. She takes proper part in all the ceremonies and devotions, but her behaviour in class and outside of it shows a bewildering clash with the devotional activity. If you ask me, I suspect Margaret does not see any other direction for her life. But I could be wrong. It might be something else.’

‘It could be...,’ said Aine, feeling for once that Virginia was missing something. There was more purpose in Margaret’s actions than Virginia was acknowledging.

‘I wonder what her family background is like,’ murmured Virginia. ‘I wonder, too, why she expressed such aversion towards males. I imagine she’s not so unattractive that no boy would consider her. In any case, I’ve got to put stop to my nosiness and opinion-giving. I am going to bore even you in the end.’

‘Oh no, not at all, I am interested. You make it obvious that I do not reflect enough about what I am doing here. I’m too immersed in my thoughts.’

‘You are kind – and reassuring. But I should watch my propensity to lecture like a school ma’m. Don’t you think it’s time to ring the bell?’

Aine looked at her watch, let out a cry and headed immediately for the rocky stairway. Virginia watched with a faint smile as Aine, with veil swishing behind her, revealing her blond air, quickly climbed the steps leading to the neo-Gothic style building with its imposing central tower.

‘I wonder what such a beautiful girl is doing here. You seem to have her attention.’ Margaret had approached unnoticed with Elizabeth and Jannie.

‘The same could be asked of you,’ said Virginia, irritated by the insolent smirk. ‘I think Aine has reflected more on that question than you three.’

‘The school teacher is always ready with her lessons.’

‘And you are always ready with impertinent schoolgirl comments.’

‘Our postulant mistress seems to see more of your teacher-preaching than my schoolgirl replies,’ said Margaret, making it clear she was not to be intimidated.

Virginia, regretting her dig as soon as she made it, determined to avoid open conflict. It was not her task to correct Margaret. Anyhow, the postulant mistress was sure to see in the end what was apparent to anyone who looked. ‘My impression is that Aine is quite spiritually in-

clined,' she said, to end the exchange.

'She seems to have taken to you – and the other way round.'

'We can talk freely with each other, if that's what you mean,' said Virginia, frowning. 'I hope I could do the same with everyone.'

'Well!' said Margaret, inclining her head slightly towards her friends and raising her eyebrows.

The bell rang, its sound echoing down the parapets and across the river. Relieved, Virginia rose and headed towards the steps. This exchange had not done anything to moderate her feelings. Yes, she had to admit, she felt an almost uncontrollable antipathy towards that young woman. She should be careful where it would lead. But the impudence of that last expression...!

During the sixth week of the postulancy, an empty spot appeared in class and chapel. Then it was as if the flood gates opened; there was a steady flow of departures over the following weeks that brought the number down to twelve. The remaining postulants greeted the sudden absence of each with no discernible reaction. Virginia only commented to Aine that it was a good thing those girls came to the end of the process of discernment with the right degree of surety and resignation.

'With their stint in the convent behind them, they will be free now to go to dances, pursue boys and listen to pop music.'

But then, as if to challenge Virginia's complacency, Jannie de Kam, the quietest of the three friends, began to show signs of anxiety. Tall, pretty and more feminine than the others, she seemed to have much admiration for the quick-witted Margaret and her ability to deal with the convent routine. Margaret's skill was not least obvious in her managing against explicit rules to maintain the cohesion of their little alliance. But Jannie did not possess the confidence or the presence of mind to adjust and improvise in the situation, as the others did so successfully. A mild reprimand was all they incurred most often for their misdemeanours. Jannie in contrast was caught out continually in the full glare of public scrutiny. A feeble explanation for slovenly work in the kitchen or for being late for chapel earned her a humiliating public chastisement. As these occasions began to multiply, Jannie became more and more unsettled. One afternoon, Margaret took Jannie alone to the far end of the gardens where they were out of sight of supervision.

'She's reaching breaking point,' Virginia said, drawing Aine's attention to them. 'She should get away from their influence. She does not have the make-up for it. I have experience with the Dutch. They like to be routined and organized. Jannie's typical. She can't be herself with those two.' They saw Jannie bow her head as Margaret gestured to her.

'She's crying. Come on.'

'Are you sure? We might make it worse for her.'

'Do you think so? We can't sit by and do nothing, can we?'

They walked calmly towards the two girls so as not to draw unwanted attention. Margaret and Jannie stopped talking as they approached. Jannie brushed her face with her handkerchief and looked away.

'The last thing we need is an interfering teacher with her lectures, especially one continually reprimanded as a know-all,' said Margaret. She regarded Aine for a moment. 'You can stay. You may be of comfort to Jannie. But your friend and her lack of compassion are not wanted at this moment.'

'Where did you learn such lack of respect for your seniors?' Virginia replied, but immediately regretted it.

'My seniors? You forget we are all equal here. Equality, if I have to tell the teacher, is central to the Gospel message. There!'

'I'm happy to have a discussion about the Gospel concept of equality at any time with the student,' Virginia scoffed, 'but not now. I'm more concerned with Jannie's state of mind.'

'Of course, not now,' Margaret said, pulling a face. 'If you are concerned about Jannie, if you have any compassion, you would go.'

'I'll let Jannie decide that,' said Virginia, turning to Jannie. 'Jannie, we all have to suffer being pulled up for our mistakes and character faults. That's all part of the process of discernment. It's not helpful if you let yourself be influenced by those who have a warped attitude to the rules and the religious way of life.'

'I am not influenced,' Jannie pouted. 'And I don't know who you are talking about.'

'You are more comfortable with routine and order. You're putting unnecessary pressure on yourself by following the example of those who see rules and conformity as things to pervert.'

'I'm not going to put up with your arrogance,' said Margaret, between gritted teeth.

Aine lifted her hand in an appeal for calm. Virginia rested her hand on her arm.

'Jannie, let yourself be governed by Mother Cecilia's directions. Do it calmly. She really wants you to succeed. The rules have a purpose. Don't make it more difficult for yourself.'

'If you are finally finished with your speeches,' said Margaret, stepping in between them, forcing Virginia to step back. Margaret stood at least two inches above her. 'You should follow the example of Aine, who is a model of non-interference and tolerance. I give Jannie what you don't: friendship. Jannie knows she can rely on me. Don't you, Jannie?'

‘Yes,’ said Jannie, ‘you are wrong about Margaret. And you are wrong about me. It’s the unfair treatment I am getting.’ Her breast heaved suddenly. A sob escaped. ‘And I am trying my best to do the right thing.’

‘You’re just making it worse with your interference,’ said Margaret, putting her arm around Jannie’s shoulder.

‘Genuine friendship does not make things worse,’ said Virginia, resigning herself.

‘My friendship and solidarity with Jannie as she suffers the unfair treatment of a rigid and insensitive authority is what she needs – not your worn-out preaching.’

‘Where are you getting all that nonsense?’

‘Nonsense is it? Are ideas of tolerance, equality and solidarity nonsense? You should ask yourself what you are doing here.’

‘It depends on how you understand those ideas.’ Virginia stopped and reflected. ‘You say you were dux of your school?’

‘Yes, what of it?’

‘What school was that?’

‘St Patrick’s in Footscray. Why, why are you asking? It was an excellent school if that’s what you’re getting to.’

‘I’ve no doubt it was. And I have no doubt about the level of your education, or your cleverness. What does your father do?’

‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’ said Margaret, releasing Jannie. ‘Virginia Pearson, product of English stock and the Eastern suburbs. Aine, why are you spending so much time with this flower of the England, with her snooty accent? Aine O’Riordan has more in common with Margaret McGuigan – especially an O’Riordan from Belfast.’

‘Names have nothing to do with it,’ said Aine. ‘My father’s best friend is from English ancestry. My parents do not want to carry the troubles of Ireland over to Australia.’

‘Thank you, Aine,’ said Virginia. ‘But I was thinking of the unions...’

‘There are things that must not be forgotten,’ Margaret said, speaking over her. ‘They’re the ideas that excused the violent oppression of a people for centuries. The ideals that arm us against such oppression are found in our Catholic religion.’ She raised an accusing finger at Virginia.

‘You have learned your lessons well. You should understand exactly how the Church understands the concepts of equality, freedom, and brotherhood. Why have you not heard about those papal encyclicals...?’

‘Apparently the nuns did not think it necessary to my education – or to my understanding of those key concepts,’ she smirked. ‘By the way, those ideas are about freedom, equality and sisterhood.’

‘You have no place in this community,’ said Virginia grimly. ‘You should go elsewhere to pursue your particular ideals.’

‘I am pursuing Catholic ideals amidst a community of independent professional women. Clever independent professional women. There could be no better place.’ She took Jannie by the arm. ‘I think we have heard enough, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Jannie, clearly impressed with the way her friend had dealt with Virginia Pearson. ‘I’m all right now. I feel a lot better.’

‘I knew you would,’ said Margaret, leading her away. She stopped and looked back. ‘Aine, I know you wanted to help. Jannie appreciates it.’ Jannie nodded eagerly. ‘Join us any time. You would be more at home with us.’

‘I’ve been routed, haven’t I?’ said Virginia, as they watched Margaret and Jannie walk arm-in-arm along the flower gardens, their black veils and dresses contrasting sharply with the display of colourful roses. ‘That young woman is no fool.’

‘Routed? No, I don’t think so. I am beginning to understand, too.’

‘Thank you, Aine, but there is more to it than you could understand at this point. We may need to be conscious of our own alliance.’

Aine looked back a couple of times as she climbed the rocky stairs to ring the bell. She saw Virginia below, still standing alone beside the flower garden, looking at the other postulants who were gathering in a loose bunch at the bottom of the stairs. She saw Margaret and Elizabeth look in Virginia’s direction, the image of a line of aggression forming in her mind. For the first time since that first morning, she felt a pang of anxiety. She reflected on the growing conflict as she tugged on the rope to ring the bell high in the tower. She wandered to the edge of the cloisters and sat on a wooden bench. She felt it approaching. It was stirring. She put her hand on the bench to steady herself and found her hand resting on a book, yellow through age. She picked it up. *Pistis Sophia*, she made out in faded old Gothic print. Next moment the book was snatched from her hands.

‘Give that to me,’ barked one of the older nuns. ‘None of your business! Can’t I leave something unattended for one moment?’ She stalked off in a swirl of black linen and turned into one of the passages off the cloisters.

Shaken, Aine followed the loose group of postulants as they arrived at the top of the stairs. But she hardly knew what she was doing. Those strange unnerving feelings that had accompanied the whispering of weeks earlier were returning. Looking around she stumbled on the kneeler as she entered the pew. She steadied herself with both hands against the back of the postulant in front of her, who turned and gave her a strange admiring look. There was Margaret in the pew in front, kneeling next to

Jannie with her head bowed and eyes closed.

In the fading distance, down in the cold moist earth, a faint whispering stirred. She tried to ignore it, struggling to attribute it to her anxiety. 'Maeeh...' she heard again and again, as the whispering tapered off in the formation of a word that kept on being repeated. She struggled to ignore it. The black habits, the burning candles, the altar rails, the dark doors...it was all in constant mingling motion. Gradually a grey hazy curtain began to fall over her eyes. Next moment she was slouched half over the girl next to her who was trying in vain to prop her up. Then she felt herself being lifted from the pew and walked towards the back of the chapel. In her dazed breathless state, she felt eyes following her; she felt the whispering following her. When she came to her senses, she found herself lying trembling on a settee in one of the parlours. Mother Cecilia and Virginia were looking down at her. She tried to get up.

'No, stay where you are for the moment,' said the postulant mistress. 'We have called the doctor.'

'I'm all right,' said Aine, attempting to get up.

'No. Stay where you are.'

'I've told Mother about your anxieties,' said Virginia.

'I asked her what she knew. She had to tell me.'

At that point Mother Jerome arrived. Virginia stood back, waiting to be dismissed. But Mother Jerome signalled to her to stay. Mother Cecilia gave a short account of what had happened. The convent's doctor arrived as she was finishing. He was left alone with Aine while Mother Cecilia returned to chapel and Mother Jerome took Virginia to the corridor. The doctor found nothing physically wrong with Aine and attributed her fainting to stress and anxiety. Mother Jerome nodded without comment and thanked the doctor for his prompt service. After directing Aine to remain in the parlour, she took Virginia to her office.

'You are not happy with some of your fellow postulants, are you?' said Mother Jerome, after signalling to Virginia to kneel in front of her desk.

Virginia knelt, hesitating in her answer. 'I must admit that I have reservations about some of them.'

'Reservations?'

'They may not be suited to religious life,' she said, bowing her head. 'Perhaps I am speaking out of turn.'

'You are decided in this,' said Mother Jerome, ignoring the latter comment. 'So decided that you have perhaps said something to the postulants concerned – a reprimand, perhaps?'

'Yes, Mother, I've been overstepping the mark, I know.'

'You had better tell me why you have arrived at that judgment.'

Virginia related her views about the general ignorance of Church teaching, especially its social teaching. She thought there were some among the postulants who were deficient in this respect, particularly those who had come straight from school. There was also a question of maturity. The usually confident Virginia Pearson blushed nervously.

'It's not really your concern, is it?' Virginia nodded, her head still bowed. 'These are matters for your postulant mistress. Or don't you think she is competent to deal with them. Perhaps she is also deficient.' There was no sarcasm in her voice; it was merely an open inquiry – which was all the more accusatory for it being so.

'Oh no, Mother,' Virginia hastened to say, lifting her head. 'It's only my personal opinion. I would not dream of challenging Mother Cecilia.'

'Your personal opinion? Your personal opinions are precious, no doubt,' said Mother Jerome, again without feeling. 'You have kept these precious opinions to yourself?'

Virginia had to admit she had not. She was forced then to relate how her opinions were aired during discussions about Aine's state of mind. One thing was leading to another and she felt now that she was breaking confidence. 'I want to stress,' she said, 'that when I speak of Aine's anxiety, I don't mean an ordinary anxiety as if she was immature, or suffered a character defect. It's something else, something that worries me.'

'Really?' said Mother Jerome. 'Can you explain further?'

'It seems more like a spiritual anxiety,' Virginia began hesitantly. 'Aine looks young, but she is not an immature girl.'

Mother Jerome nodded her head a few times with the same expressionless gaze. 'I suppose your time as a teacher has given you some insight into girls of that age?'

'Yes, Mother.' She thought she saw a softening in Mother Jerome's eyes.

'Did you understand the distinctions I made about the nature of freedom, authority and obedience?'

'Yes, Mother, I have read and studied the social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII. It was part of my teaching program.'

'Yes, I seem to remember you saying so in your interview.'

'They were crucial in awakening my vocation. My reading made me understand how deficient my knowledge was about Church social teaching. Most Catholics would not know of the existence of Pope Leo XIII, let alone... I'm sorry, I am speaking out of turn again.'

'Do you think your fellow postulants are aware of the distinctions?'

'Some aren't...' she said cautiously.

'I want an honest answer.'

'I don't think many people these days understand the distinction between the idea of God-given authority and the idea of authority created by the will of the people.'

'Very good, Miss Pearson, you have understood well.'

'My fiancé...my fiancé was...is an academic...'

'Yes, I remember. Was...is? Do you miss him?'

'I...I have made my choice, Mother.'

'That's not answering my question, Miss Pearson.'

'I suppose...it's hard to turn my back...'

'Of course, it is. Be honest with yourself.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'No doubt, you also miss the conversations?'

'The conversations?'

'You had that sort of philosophic discussion with others?'

'Not really...no.'

There were some uncomfortable moments while Virginia had to suffer the Prioress's close scrutiny. 'Miss Pearson, you can return to chapel now.' Virginia got up quickly. 'Please leave matters of discernment to your postulant mistress. And take time to look into your own heart.'

'Yes, Reverend Mother.'

'Think about this,' Mother Jerome said, in the spirit of an afterthought. 'The existence of a faulty or incomplete opinion in a community is not necessarily harmful to the health of that community, if temporary. Indeed, the insistence of an individual's particular true opinion may cause the greatest harm to unity if forced through without due prudential consideration. Prudence, Miss Pearson, is one of the cardinal virtues.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Mother Jerome's expression changed to sympathy as she watched Virginia leave the room.

Aine finished the tea that had been brought to her, but remained sitting despondently on the settee looking at the Persian rug in front of her. The shaded parlour in dark antique colours was at the front of the building, facing the public road to the north-west. The road that ran along a bushy ridge above the Yarra River was at the end of a fifty yard crushed rock avenue to the convent. There was not a sound coming from that deserted area. The bottom frames of the large sash windows were fitted with a patterned translucent glass. She looked through the clear top frame of the nearest window at the yellow-tinged branches of the tall eucalypts swaying gently in the silent late afternoon breeze. The gentle swaying soothed her agitated feelings, granting relief from the

fear and incomprehension that had beset her.

As she sought relief in the vision of the swaying branches in the sun's dying rays, the silhouette of a veiled head and shoulders suddenly appeared in the translucent frame directly below the clear frame. It remained motionless for a minute. Then it turned to face the window as if it was trying to look inside. Aine stood up, placing her hand nervously on the armrest of the settee. Another hooded silhouette came into the frame. It came closer to the glass. Aine moved instinctively to the side and then to the back of the settee. The two silhouettes drew back from the window so that Aine could just make out their vague dark forms against the fading light. There followed a low whispering. At that moment the parlour door opened and Mother Jerome glided noiselessly in. Aine swung around to face her.

'What is it, child?'

'There is someone outside the window.'

'Outside the window?'

'Yes, that one.'

Mother Jerome went to the window and pushed up the sash. She glanced to the left and right. 'There is nobody there. Are you sure you saw someone?' She closed the window with a sharp push.

'Yes...yes. They were trying to look inside.'

'It is not usual for anyone to be walking there at this time. Perhaps you had mistaken the trees...?'

'No, Mother, I saw someone – two people.'

'Well, I am sure there is a rational explanation,' said the Prioress, taking a seat and indicating to Aine to resume hers. 'Now tell me about your anxieties. I have been speaking to Miss Pearson. She is worried about you.'

Aine understood that the request was not optional. She tried to explain succinctly, without embellishment or downplaying what seemed melodramatic and fanciful.

'It does sound strange and unreal, doesn't it?' said the Prioress. 'Do you think an overwrought imagination may be playing tricks on you?'

'I don't know, Mother. That first night seemed to be a nightmare.'

'An ordinary nightmare?'

'What do you mean?'

'We all have frightening nightmares at some time or another. Mostly this is nothing to worry about. Sometimes nightmares, especially if they are continuing, can indicate a worrying level of anxiety. The doctor has not said anything definite, but he seems to be suggesting that you may be under much stress because of your presence here, in the convent. Have you thought that you may not be suited to religious life?'

Aine's heart sank. 'Yes, Mother, I have thought of that. But all I can say is that I yearn to pursue the life of a religious. These periods of anxieties do not arise because of my presence here, the enclosed life, or any doubts about my religious aspirations. They come from outside...I mean, they come as something apart from me, something I have no control over.' She found herself struggling to express what she felt.

'Why are you here?' said Mother Jerome, after a pause. 'Why do you think you have a religious vocation? There is no dishonour in admitting that you are not being called. Have you thought that God in his wisdom wants you to be a wife and mother – that you could fulfil your religious aspirations equally well in married life?'

'No, Mother, it has never entered my head,' Aine answered, her head dropping. 'I am here because I want to dedicate myself to Jesus and to share in his suffering. I want to take the Virgin Mary as my model of holiness, purity of mind and total dedication to God's will.'

'Your friend, Miss Pearson, has deplored the general ignorance of Church teaching among Catholics. Would you escape that accusation?'

'I don't know – I suppose not. But I am here to learn whatever is necessary.'

'Where has your knowledge of the faith come from?'

Aine hesitated. The faith had always been an unconscious part of her existence; it was just there – never questioned and never doubted. 'My family, the school and my reading about the lives of the saints...'

'The lives of the saints?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'You have never read or thought about some of the philosophers and theologians of the Church? Your school results show that you have the intelligence to understand.'

'No, Mother, I have never been drawn to that sort of writing.'

'Miss Pearson has. What do you think of that?'

'I think she is inclined in that direction. She appears more mature than the rest of us.'

'The rest of you?'

'Yes, Mother.'

Mother Prioress looked hard at her. Aine was on the point of wilting when the Prioress rose. She got quickly to her feet.

'I would like you to return to the chapel. I want you to consider seriously what you would be giving up as a religious with vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. You are to consider what it would be like to have a husband and children. I am requesting that of you.'

Aine understood that she was being dismissed and that any objection to the implications of Mother Jerome's orders was not to be heard.

She made her way back to the chapel, perplexed. Surely she had given enough indication that marriage was far from her thoughts; she could not even think about it. Her mind could not permit the thoughts. Her problems lay elsewhere.

As she arrived at the doors of the chapel the community of nuns was leaving to go about their various tasks. She waited to the side for the postulants who were the last to exit the chapel. She saw Margaret and Elizabeth glance knowingly at her as they passed. What were they thinking? She saw Virginia's comforting face at the end of the line. Mother Cecilia emerged and directed her to fall in behind Virginia. There was an impatient click of her fingers in response to Aine's attempt to relate the Prioress's direction. Aine was relieved. That evening, Virginia sought her out.

'I hope I did not make things too difficult for you,' she whispered, looking around to see where Margaret and Elizabeth were.

'No. I understand. I couldn't get out of talking about...Mother cast some doubt...'. She could not finish the thought.

They were on the top parapet looking down into the darkness of a moonless night. The resting river reflected the twinkling stars in the clear cold air. The lights of the rooms along the cloisters gave the postulants in their veils and long dark dresses a yellow ghost-like hue as they walked slowly along the gardens, talking quietly. Virginia took Aine's arm gently. She glanced over her shoulder.

Aine, dear girl, none of us can be sure that we have a vocation,' she began hesitantly. 'Let us make a pact. If one of us should have to leave, let us agree always to remain in contact one way or another.'

'Of course, I would like that. Very much... Do you think I may be rejected?'

Virginia still hesitated. 'Aine, out of all the girls here, it seems to me that you and Rose have the depth of religious feeling and commitment that would naturally lead to a religious life.' More hesitation. 'But there is something unusual about you...'

'Look!' Aine broke in.

At the far end of the gardens Virginia caught sight of a long dark veil disappearing into the darkness of the cloisters. Aine was staring rigidly. 'It's just one of the sisters,' she said, putting her arm around Aine.

'There were two of them,' whispered Aine.

'Two of them? I...anyhow, it's the same. They were walking in the garden like the rest of us, before retiring.'

But when she thought about it, Virginia realised the professed nuns were not normally there at that time. And the veil seemed strangely

intent on getting out of sight. Aine broke in on her thoughts, telling her breathlessly about the two hooded silhouettes in the translucent glass.

‘Good heavens, it does sound strange,’ said Virginia. They came to the end of the gardens, where they had seen the veil disappear. ‘There’s a stairway there that leads to the next floor. It’s odd that there are no lights on. Come on...’

‘Don’t you think you’re been up to enough for one day?’ called a voice from the other side of the garden bed.

Aine and Virginia strained their eyes in the dark, eventually making out in the sparse light Margaret, Elizabeth and Jannie sitting on a bench by the hedge that ran along the boundary fence. Virginia took Aine’s arm and turned to walk back along the way they had come. Margaret followed along the other side of the garden bed.

‘I know why you want to ignore me,’ said Margaret, smirking. ‘No doubt you were wriggling under some uncomfortable questioning.’

‘You are presumptuous,’ said Virginia, stopping and confronting her over the roses.

‘Am I?’

‘Aine is capable of understanding who she is with, unlike others.’

‘Really?’ said Margaret, making a face at her companions who had joined her. ‘Aine is the one who fainted and had to be carried from chapel. She is the one the doctor was called to see.’

‘Just how do you know what happened?’

‘You don’t have to be Einstein... Aine, This person is no good for you. Your place is with us – in the solidarity of a shared sisterhood.’

‘You are really fluent in that rubbish. I’m dying to know where you are getting it from.’

‘Rubbish? If you mean the idea of solidarity then it’s you that has to wonder what you are doing here.’

‘Your rhetoric smacks of the Enlightenment rather than the Gospels.’

‘Enlightenment? Well, that is the right word. Aine, really, your anxiety will disappear in our friendship. You will be freed from the clamping self-doubt this teacher is wrapping you in.’

‘Just who was your religion or history teacher in your final year?’ said Virginia, astounded at what she was hearing. ‘Or was it your unionist father...?’

‘Always falling back on the crutch of class distinction, aren’t you?’ Margaret spat out angrily. ‘The divisions are crumbling. You are losing your influence and power. The equality of the Gospels is overtaking you and your type.’

‘I rather doubt your idea of equality is the equality the Apostles spoke

of. But you have learnt your lessons well. Those that have been tutoring you can be satisfied with the regurgitation.'

'Whatever. Aine, our friendship is always there. Don't forget.' She moved off in the direction of the main entrance, with Jannie and Elizabeth following.

'Wait,' said Virginia. Margaret stopped, putting one hand on her hip. 'Who were the sisters you were talking to?'

'Which sisters?' she said, glancing at her companions.

'The two sisters who entered the cloisters over there.'

'I don't know what you are talking about. Come on. Let's get away from this bad influence.' They moved off, Jannie throwing a worried look behind her.

'Jannie, you are putting yourself under a lot of unnecessary pressure,' Virginia called. Margaret took Jannie by the arm and whispered something in her ear. Jannie looked back again, but then let herself be led away. 'That girl is heading for a crisis.'

'I think you are right,' said Aine.

'I wonder why Margaret is so intent on getting you out of my clutches.'

'Out of your clutches? Do you really think that's what she wants?'

'She obviously wants anyone out of my clutches, but she has a special interest in you. Why?' She paused. 'That's a clever girl who has been exposed to the relevant material, however much she reels it off.' She glanced at Aine. 'You're not really familiar with the nonsense she goes on with, are you?'

'No, I admit I'm not quite sure what you and Margaret are referring to.'

'Does it sound like the right message?'

'No, there's something discordant about it.'

'Do her invitations have any impact on you?'

'No. I don't want to be unfriendly to anyone, but she makes me feel uncomfortable. Actually, it's not really her. It's something about her, something that seems to be around her. I'm not quite sure what it is.'

Virginia looked at her in the manner of someone searching for clues.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's investigate.'

They entered the darkened cloisters and walked cautiously to the flight of stairs, stopping at the bottom step. The faint light from above struggled to make its way into the stairwell. Virginia climbed the first couple of steps. There was a vague rustling and scrapping. She stopped, leaned back and grabbed Aine's shoulder.

'Did you hear that?'

'Yes, the whispering again.'

'Whispering? What whispering?'

Suddenly, the light above went out, leaving the staircase in impenetrable blackness. There was more scrapping and rustling. Virginia fell back on Aine, then toppled onto one knee with Aine clutching blindly at her.

‘Ow!’

‘What happened?’ said Aine, helping her to her feet.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ said Virginia, holding on to Aine and limping. They hurried from the cloisters and walked smartly along the rose bed in the direction of the lights coming from the main area. Halfway along Virginia stopped and looked back. She rubbed her knee.

‘It’s weird, very weird. I don’t know whether I fell or was pushed.’

‘Pushed? Who would push you?’

‘That’s a good question. Strange things have happened today – beginning with your episode in the chapel.’

‘It really started before that.’

‘What?’

‘I felt something coming at me when I was ringing the bell. I sat on a nearby bench to steady myself. One of the older sisters angrily snatched a book from me that I had picked up from the bench. I had unconsciously rested my hand on it. Then when I was contemplating Margaret in chapel, looking at her in prayer, it seemed so out of tune with...’

‘Is that why you fainted?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know exactly what is causing it, though it all seems connected in some odd way. I really don’t know.’

‘What was the book?’

‘It was an old book with a strange title – *Pistis Sophia*.’

‘*Pistis Sophia*? What in the world is that? Who was the sister?’

‘I don’t know. She was gone before I could get a good look at her. She was very angry. She accused me of interfering.’

Virginia looked silently at the garden bed, deep in thought.

‘Let’s go down to the grotto below.’

Aine followed her down the rocky steps into the clearing just above the river, barely lit by the lights coming from above.

‘It’s peaceful here, isn’t it?’ said Virginia. She took hold of Aine’s arm and walked in the direction of the grotto.

‘Was it a push...?’ said Aine.

‘I’m not sure. I suddenly felt myself falling back. Whether I lost my step or was pushed, I can’t be sure.’

‘Surely you would feel it, if you were pushed.’

‘You would think so, but that’s the strange part about it. I had a sort of sensation as if I was pushed gently but sharply – if that makes sense. It was in a way to warn me not to come any further. It did not feel like

a real push, though.'

They walked in silence, deep in thought, until they arrived at the grotto. The white statues appeared to be gleaming in the dark.

'You know,' Virginia began slowly, after releasing a weary sigh, 'Philip's academic specialty is the history of ideas. A week or so before we saw each other for the last time, he began talking about the influence of current thinking on some of the major issues of the time. I don't know why he started on about that...it came out of the blue...well, we used to talk about those sorts of things endlessly...I will miss that.' She stopped for a few moments. 'Anyhow, he said that discussions the Church had put a brake on in the early part of the century were raising their head again within Church academic circles. These were ideas, he said, that were incompatible with Church teaching. I was expecting him to elaborate, but he said we would talk about it again. We didn't talk about it again...he didn't know that that would be our last intimate conversation...I felt awful...'

She broke off as if immersed in her rather disconnected speech. She moved towards the grotto. Aine followed. She saw Virginia's head bow in the sparse light. A few moments later she heard a quiet sob. She put her arm around her shoulder. They stood there while Virginia sobbed gently. Eventually Virginia lifted her head and wiped her eyes.

'There, that's finished now, forever. There's no going back.' She moved forward to the stone kneelers. 'There is something mysterious going on here. Your experiences, the clash I'm having with Margaret, the disappearing nuns...it's like a harbinger...of what, I don't know or understand. Is it connected with Philip's warning...I don't know?' She held Aine's hand tightly. 'Remember our pact, won't you?'

'Of course,' said Aine, feeling that there was more going on in Virginia's mind than she was prepared to say. 'We will always maintain our friendship.'

'Let's say a prayer,' said Virginia, 'that we will face whatever is to come.'

They knelt down in front of the grotto. Not far away hidden behind the shrubs and bushes on the parapet above, several pairs of eyes watched.