

Pioneers

Sr. Joan Mooney

My mother waved good-bye to my brother and me as we set off. A fifteen-minute walk took us from our home to the school. It was Monday, January 25, 1943. I was nine years old and my brother, John, was seven. We had to take ourselves off to our new school because my mother had two younger children and my father was at work.

It was with a mixture of diffidence and excitement that we entered the gates of Mt. Carmel, Coorparoo. I was wearing a brown pinafore and white panama hat. New clothes always brought a tinge of excitement. I had never worn brown to school before, so I felt crisp and new.

The school bell rang and our rather straggly group got into some kind of formation. There was a nun sitting on a chair on the school verandah, and all the new pupils had to go up to her to enrol. This was the first time I saw a Franciscan Sister, though it was not until some days later that I found out that was what she was called. I was a bit afraid of her. She had an abrupt voice and beetling eyebrows, and when she asked my father's occupation, I couldn't explain properly. I told her he worked in the naval offices, and I saw her write down R.A.N. (Royal Australian Navy) in the register. I knew it was wrong and I felt uncomfortable about it, but I was unable to explain to her. I didn't like the habit she was wearing either. No one wore brown and black in these days. The square shape of the veil looked very strange after the curved headgear of the Josephite Sisters. And the white starched bib seemed wrong because it covered up the neck and came right up to the chin. It looked uncomfortable too.

The name of this Sister, I learned later that day, was Sister Mary Raymond. It was also her first day at the school. Sister Mary Monica taught the babies—all the children up to the age of seven—and Sister Mary Raymond taught everyone else. Two days later, we were surprised to see three Sisters get off the tram and come down the hill to the school. The new Sister was Sister Mary Bernadette. She gave piano and elocution lessons and helped with the classes as well.

Sister Mary Raymond was my class teacher, and I soon found her much less severe than her manner had originally suggested. She was often, in fact, quite funny, so lessons were mostly enjoyable. I enrolled for piano lessons with Sister Mary Bernadette. The piano was in the church sacristy, so the candlesticks and vestments formed a backdrop to the music lessons. Sister Mary Bernadette was gentle yet thorough, and under her tutelage my love of music blossomed and the foundation of my career in music was established. Everyone liked Sister Mary Bernadette, because she was both pretty and charming. One day when we were discussing the various teachers, my friend Lynette Scahill said that her favourite was Sister Mary, and she kissed the back of her hand twice. She meant, of course, Sister Mary Bernadette.

In March of the first year, I broke my arm, and soon after that I went with my family for a holiday to the beach. When I returned to school it was the same as starting all over again. I couldn't use my left arm at all, so managing the everyday practicalities of school life was difficult. To make matters worse, Sister Mary Raymond had gone and I had another new teacher to come to know. Her name was Mother McCartney. On my first day back, she came over to me and held up my desk top for me. I was embarrassed. She had a pronounced Irish accent and called me "Jorn." When I told my father the name of my new teacher, he remarked, "The Mothers evidently use their surnames." On one occasion, he wrote a note to Mother McCartney to explain my absence from school for a few days. To my extreme embarrassment, on reading my father's letter, she proceeded to explain her

name to the whole class. She wrote MACARTAN on the blackboard, had us pronounce it correctly, and told us that Saint Macartan was an Irish Bishop.

I had a long relationship with Mother Macartan, as she was my class teacher from March 1943 until August 1946. It was a relationship that transcended that of teacher-pupil, and we became real friends. I believed every word she said, and I was more than happy to do everything she asked of me. Often when she was teaching she would toss her veil over her shoulder, and I would while away the time watching her neck. She wore a folded cloth around her neck, and I used to ponder over what kind of garment this actually was. Mother Macartan told us lots of stories about Saint Francis. I loved the one about the wolf of Gubbio. From these stories, an image and an understanding of St. Francis gradually developed in my consciousness.

Sister Mary Monica taught us art once a week. She was very quiet and precise. She drew a candle in a candle holder on the blackboard, and shaded and finished it with extreme attention to detail. Our task was to transfer this image into our pastel books.

Despite the fact that we were on good terms with these very friendly Sisters, there was a good deal of mystery attached to their personal lives. We had endless discussions about how and whether they went to bed, what and how they ate. On one occasion, Father Nugent, the parish priest, took the entire school population on a picnic to Sandgate. We were amusing ourselves on the beach when I suddenly saw Father Nugent hand Mother Macartan a red cordial. To my astonishment, she drank it. I had never before seen a nun eat or drink, and it looked very odd.

After some months of a daily tram journey from Kedron, which was on the other side of the city, the parish bought a house for the Sisters. Soon after they were established in the convent, my mother went to visit them and I accompanied her. It was Saturday afternoon. We walked carefully up the front steps and rang the doorbell. A Sister ushered us into a sitting-room. It was so mysterious, I scarcely dared breathe. The sunshine filtering through the shutters conveyed a muted tone and made the furniture sparkle in the dim light. I had never seen anything so spotless. The Sisters fluttered in to greet us, their entry announced by the clicking of their rosary beads.

As the school grew, other Sisters arrived. Sister Mary Leo was hard to understand because she had a strange voice. She said one day, "Tom, spell banana," and Tom Crick stood up and said "banana-b-a-n-a-n-a," imitating her accent! The rough and tumble of primary school students often got the better of her, and her chasing children around the classroom invariably resulted in an uproar. In the end, she withdrew to do the cooking. But she was so kind and charming that everyone adored her. Sister Mary Christina was the tiniest person I had ever seen. She was irreverently referred to as Crispies (a breakfast food of that era!). Sister Mary Michael was tall with a red face. Miss Magee came for a few months to help with the classes. I was cheeky to her one day, saying "Yes, Miss!" and "No, Miss!" in a very bold fashion. I was generally well behaved and polite, more from the desire to please than from any innate goodness. A lot of children played on Miss Magee, but she retained her composure fairly well through it all.

In August of my final year of primary school, a new teacher arrived for my grade. I was devastated. The loss of Mother Macartan was more than I could bear, and getting used to Sister Mary Padua didn't make things any easier. Sister Mary Padua's thick bushy eyebrows gave her a fierce appearance. She was very stern and exacting and made us work extremely hard. The very first morning of the term she arrived at 8 a.m. and announced that henceforth we were to be in class at that ungodly hour! She was very keen on teaching us catechism. The lesson lasted exactly

one hour. There was a clock on her desk with the dial facing her, and on the dot of 10 a.m. the catechism lesson ended and prayers began. They lasted fifteen minutes. Sister Mary Padua's two great loves were Our Lady and St. Anthony. She read us a book about Our Lady of Fatima which went into great detail about the dance of the sun and other phenomenal events.

At the end of 1946 I graduated from primary school, and the following year I traveled into the city to attend a large secondary school. New friends, new interests, and new activities absorbed all my attention. It was all very high-powered and exciting in comparison with primary school. Occasionally I went back to Mt Carmel to visit my old teachers, and whenever I did, some strong chord resonated within me. I didn't quite know what it was, but some quality in the Franciscan Sisters was different from what I met elsewhere. It was a quality that stayed in my heart.