ABOUT TIME

1918 – 1939

PENELOPE MORTIMER

About Time 1918 – 1939

by Penelope Mortimer

First Published in 1979 by Allen Lane, Penguin Books Ltd.
2nd Edition Published in 1993 by Weidenfield & Nicolson, The Orion Publishing Group Ltd

Penelope Mortimer (nee Fletcher) was a pupil at St Elphin's from 1930 to 1934

Chapter 8 (pages 118-150
In The Fourth Place

Please note: *The following is published exactly as it is in the book – including poor grammar and spelling! Liz Donlan*.

We may have spent the Easter holidays at Bowerhill, or we may have spent them in a place called Milford, where I think there was a holiday house or home for needy vicars. If it was Milford, my mother made the acquaintance of a new family of ghosts. If it was Bowerhill, this may have been the spring when I fell in love again, with a boy who operated a roundabout at the fair. He always wore a canary-yellow pullover, and I would bicycle to the fairground before breakfast in the hope of seeing him. I'm pretty sure we never spoke. He must have been about fifteen, and stood nonchalantly on the whirling roundabout, not even holding on.

I do know that the holidays were made particularly glorious by the fact that we were leaving Thornton Heath, though I didn't realize that this was related to my father's sudden and catastrophic discovery of Communism. Bored with the after-life, his energy had soared once more. With his usual reckless enthusiasm, he had devoted a whole issue of the parish magazine to supporting the Soviet persecution of the Church. Christ, he argued, was the first Communist; Lenin and Marx (I'm not sure about Trotsky) were true apostles; the Church (Orthodox or Anglican, they were all the same) was corrupt, decadent and immoral, and should immediately be disbanded. He himself would be the first to turn St Peter's, Thornton Heath, into a museum or cinema or even garage, if one were needed.

Nobody understood it. He was appalled, amazed. At last, after so much searching, he had rediscovered Christianity. Did the Church of England not care for Christianity? Apparently not. He had been advised to leave the diocese, and we were moving to Derbyshire, which, for us, was the north. Perhaps a little money had come from somewhere, because my mother was full of plans for stair-carpets, and my brother was mistakenly asked to design my bedroom furniture, which would be made by a local carpenter and painted – according to my tasteless instructions – apple green.

There was also the Garden School, Lane End, near High Wycombe, Bucks, to look forward to; and, although I didn't know it then, my first experience of prolonged distress.

I'm sure the Garden School meant well. It was, at that time, the wrong place for me. At the age of eleven, in spite of my poetry and prancing and carrying on, I was as firm a Wesleyan, at heart, as my father. The New School, for all its outlandish beliefs, had been domestic and tranquil as a

nursery; at Blencathra, table-manners and genteel courtesies hadn't been too hard to learn. When I found myself in a place where the convention was to be 'free' and artistic and troublesome, where everyone else was 'difficult' – and probably selfish and ungrateful as well – I didn't know what to do; I was lost.

As I wasn't required to go to lessons, I wandered round among the mangy rabbits and cats for a few weeks, the mud (it was a wet summer, and fashionable to go barefoot) squelching between my toes. After that, for shelter, I crept into whatever class I could find, whether it was seventeen-year-olds studying comparative religion or five-year-olds pounding clay. Rabindradath Tagore visited and, since I was passing, blessed me. It didn't do any good. A'Lelia, the pretty daughter of a famous black entertainer called Layton, shared my dormitory with about six other girls and two snoring spaniels. A'Lelia played her father's records late into the night, when I knew perfectly well I should be tucked up and asleep. I desperately wanted to be cared for, and to have somebody to tell me that I was full of sin.

I was probably bored for the first time in my life. I wrote passionate letters to my parents insisting that I wanted to work, to learn something, to be useful. I said I wanted to be like my brother, and be educated. My mother was directing the carpet-layers in Belper; my father, temporarily chastened, and was starting a new life. But they came to visit me, and may have had plaintive conversations with the headmistress; when they left, I cried, it seemed, for the rest of the term.

Now they had moved to Derbyshire – which surely must be more like the country than Thornton Heath – I wanted to go to day school again. I had a fantasy of setting off each morning with my satchel, getting my own breakfast; I saw myself sitting at a desk, uniformed, learning beautiful facts, shooting up my hand to answer every question; I imagined coming home, quietly doing my homework, helping my mother, being a solace to her. I was, in fact, confused.

I think they did go and look at a few day schools in and around Belper. But the prospect of having me at home all the time must have appalled them. Neither of them were capable of making a habit of loving: to my mother, it was a threat, a disruption, something to be kept at bay; to my father, love was loud and operatic, with many intervals. Ordinary old love, taking and leaving, snapping and hugging, yawning while watching a child grow, was outside their experience. St Elphin's School for the Daughters of the Clergy, Darley Dale, near Matlock was cheap and respectable. The Bishop of Bradford's daughter was head girl. I would be near enough to be fetched without too much expense and trouble, and far enough away not to disturb their afternoon sleep. And if I really wanted to be like other girls, and pass examinations, I might manage to become a hospital nurse.

So I was allowed to leave the Garden School, and was taken in A'Lelia's father's grey Rolls-Royce (I was sick on its silver upholstery) to London and put on a train for Derby. My father met me in a new car, and I began to get the feeling that we were wealthy, people to be reckoned with. When we drove up the drive to the Vicarage – a big, solid house, plain, with no pretensions – I remembered Thornton Heath, and yelped with joy. My mother, for some extraordinary reason, was sitting on the stairs – perhaps the final rods were being laid on the carpet. I raced from room to room. There was space again. The familiar furniture had regained its dignity and there were huge new armchairs, more like small sofas. I admired my modernistic, apple green bedroom and ran out to explore the garden. It was big, there were secret places, disused stables, a high sloping lawn. The sky may have

been a bit grey, and the air a bit dank, but my mother seemed so happy and chatty that I knew it must be a great step in the right direction – back to Chilton, Bowerhill, our own kind of place.

Belper is a manufacturing town – sewing thread and, in those days, silk stockings. It wasn't very attractive, but it was busy, and I had never lived in a provincial town before. The River Derwent slugs through it, banked by municipal gardens and cotton mills, and St Peter's, my father's church, seats fifteen hundred people, few of whom were ever there. Another of the myriad things I didn't know was that Belper, England, and most of the world were well into the Great Depression. In fact, I thought for some time that this term had something to do with Sunday afternoons. There must have been an overwhelming number of unemployed in Belper, compared with the well-to-do solicitors, estate agents, mill owners and shopkeepers who supported the town's three Anglican churches, one Roman Catholic church, and the Congregational, Baptist and Unitarian chapels. I must assume that some of these people cared, and I'm sure my father did, in his way. It would be surprising, too, if my mother hadn't hit on some scheme for providing children with home-made toffee or teaching their distraught mothers how to do macramé. But I was not informed. Therefore, as usual, I did not know. Nobody ever impressed on me that the only way to learn anything, in school or out, was to ask questions. Even if they had, I would have needed information about what questions to ask. The whole business of learning was, therefore, a vicious circle.

On my twelfth birthday, my parents took me to St Elphin's, delivered me to the Junior School, and went away. I was square, flat-chested (which my father commented on, critical, his fierce little eyes trying to bore through my school jersey), beginning to be spotty, glasses askew over my squint, a wide grin at the slightest thing worth grinning at. My straight hair was still clasped by the mechanical slide: I was not a pretty child.

This part of the Midlands, from Harrogate down through Buxton to Matlock, gushes mineral springs: St Elphin's had originally been built as a hydropathic hospital, a place pungent with potted palms and Epsom salts, where cotton millionaires could cure their gout, their palpitations, and their melancholia. In order to deal with all the linen, towels, and even perhaps winding-sheets required in this business, the owners had built a laundry, with a chimney taller and blacker than that required for any laundry. The main house was – is? – an immense heap of gabled roofs, French windows,casement windows,latticed windows,bow windows,bay windows,frosted glass windows, stained glass windows, small apertures for servants' windows all punctured hap-hazardly into brick and ivy. Inside, there were great landings and galleries, quantities of tormented oak: the Disgrace Bench, on which I was to sit for many hours sewing chapel-kneelers, was on the first landing, just outside the staff room and the headmistress's study; is an even more undignified punishment, one had to sit in the hall all day, writing lines ("Stern Daughter of the Voice of God/Oh Duty, if thy name we love…"), and no passer-by was allowed to speak or smile. It would have been less effectively humiliating, I suppose, to be locked in stocks.

The original hydro had been extended to accommodate the two hundred or so daughters of bishops, arch-deacons, deans, rectors and vicars (I feel sure there were no curates), who flocked from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Wales, Cheshire, Lincolnshire and – most plentifully – Birmingham. For many years these extension had been in the form of huts and sheds, possibly army surplus from the

First World War, which had become a kind of comforting slum out of sight of the main house. Insufferably hot in summer, below freezing in winter, they contained dilapidated desks and benches, blackboards grey with ineradicable chalk, wilting specimens of seasonal flora, notice-boards covered in tattered baize and inextricable drawing-pins. In one of these huts, intended for 'pre' or solitary study, I would later struggle alone and, I felt, unaided with my two most detested subjects: botany and musical theory; and listen to Bing Crosby records; and write the kind of poetry that Walt Whitman might have written if he had been the pubescent daughter of an erratic Church of England clergyman living in Derbyshire in the 1930s. I think the art room was somewhere in this huddle of shacks, but when I first went to St Elphin's the only recognizable art in the place was the plaster replica of the Venus de Milo in the front hall; we bombarded it with the cascara pills that were given us each night for the first three weeks of every term, to purge us of the impurities of home cooking.

God, of course, was much in evidence. He was not only patron of the school, but He paid the fees. The Chapel, down a lugubrious path walled with rhododendron and laurel, was God' house. Tom Wolfe in *The Painted Word*, describes how, in the Social Realist period of the thirties, painters were 'dutifully cranking out paintings of unemployed Negroes, crippled war veterans, and the ubiquitous workers with open blue work-shirts and necks wider than theirs heads". The chapel of St Elphin's School for the Daughters of the Clergy was, rather astonishingly, decorated by such a painter. Instead of unemployed Negroes, there were unemployed miners; and there were unemployed miners' wives and children, all with necks wider than their heads and thick bodies without bone structure. The predominant colour was blue, blue scenes of Social Realism covering every inch of wall and ceiling in the chancel, where I would soon sit in my choir-stall wearing a white veil and gloves, waiting to launch into 'Jesu, Joy' or Stanford's 'Magnificat in C' or some Lenten dirge (which I enjoyed more) and examining with interest these lumpish substitutes for saints. There was a wreath of wild flowers painted with an attempt at *trompe-l'oeil* over the headmistress's carved throne; it was said that it was meant to look as though she were wearing it.

The headmistress, Miss Margaret Flood, M A, was – though I didn't appreciate it at the time – a sane woman. God was her employer. She respected him, read his works, carried out his orders, did a good job; but, like any efficient secretary with a life of her own outside office hours, she was not in love with him. We were not whipped into frenzy by her passion, driven into tempests of tears by her ardour, or brought to our knees by anything more than a polite but perfunctory 'Let us pray'. The roses and raptures, lilies and languors, came later, with her successor, Miss Mildred Hudson, who was not sane. The girls attended chapel at least twice a day, seven days a week, wearing panama hats in summer, grey felt hats in winter – except for the choristers, and we were veiled like midget nurses or flighty nuns, and headed the twice-daily procession from the main building, one of us carrying a crimson and gold cross on a long pole.

At some time in the late twenties, the school must have benefited from an endowment and, perhaps, new blood on the Board of Governors: the Junior School, where my parents took me that first day, was relatively new. It was connected with the main building by a covered way: once across this the walls, floor covering, the colours and smells, even the weather changed. Each of us had our own blue-curtained cubicle, our own cupboard and chest and locker; the highly polished corridor between the cubicles could be slid along from end to end, either on our sensible leather-soled shoes or – as I discovered before my first week was over – on pillows. The schoolrooms reminded me of

the Little People – the same hips and haws and largely useless enterprises. We wore white pinafores over our gym tunics at meal-times, because we were expected to be clumsy with our food. They aimed at a feeling of innocent merriment, nursery tea, bed-time stories; no one thought of gentle Jesus, meek and mild with his blond curls and Grecian tunic in an English meadow, as a boy.

For two weeks, relieved from the awful responsibilities of the Garden School, I had a wonderful time. I made the little Daughters shudder with my stories of ghosts, and girls blowing off their breasts with muskets, and playing naked on a rabbit farm. I made up tales of incredible journeys to places I had never been – India, Shangri-la, Australia, Tahiti, Brighton – and they believed every word. I told them I didn't believe in God and often went without knickers, neither of which were true. A sense of power may have taken the place of a sense of security, but the result was the same. It was a return to the Golden Age, with the added advantage of knowing (a little) what history had in store.

But they summoned me, and said I was to report to Form IVb in the Senior School; and if childhood can ever be said to end, that was the end of mine.

I approach the next few years with as much suspicion and doubt as I approached the Form IVb classroom that day, still foolishly wearing my pinafore, peering out over a load of exercise books, and my Bible and prayer book. When at last I managed to open the door, and stood hopeful and terrified, everyone burst out laughing. I wouldn't want to repeat that.

Catherine Gethen, Truda McClaren, Betty Chamberlain, Irene Wells, Ceridwen Maurice-Jones, Gwyneth Hopkins: their gym tunics were already bulging at the seams, they whispered and tittered, rustled paper bags in the dormitory. Wendy Ellison and Cynthia Pugh: women, who wore suspender belts and brassieres, sleeveless nightdresses, curled their hair with pipe-cleaners. I wore striped Viyella pyjamas, and failed to keep my stockings up with garters made of black elastic.

For a long while after that, my career was an unmitigated calamity. I was frightened all the time. Miss Flood, rosy and round, terrified me; Miss Beavis, the science teacher (her eyebrows had been blown off in a scientific explosion, and she kept telling us to observe the laundry chimney – '*belching* out carbon dioxide!') terrified me; Miss Sadler, the matron, frightened me so much that I froze to attention at her approach, and was unable to speak. She was well over six feet tall, had the face of an intemperate General, and had been a nurse with the British forces at Murmansk or Archangel. As far as Miss Sadler was concerned, I was a Bolshevik. She persecuted me, hounded me, gave me the third degree. When I came back to school without a panama hat – reasonably assuming that now I was in the choir, I wouldn't need one – she told me to go straight away, this minute, and find my panama hat. I stammered that I didn't have a panama hat. She told me to go and bring her my panama hat. I insisted that I didn't have a panama hat to bring her. She said I was lying. I whimpered that I was not lying. She hissed through her camel's teeth, and gave me a Conduct Mark and an hour on the Disgrace Bench. I wrote to my mother, begging her to send the panama hat by return. When it arrived, folded into a neat cone, Miss Sadler said that I had ruined my panama hat and must ask my mother for a new one: she knew very well, she said, that I had been hiding my panama hat from her the whole time.

Injustice: I boiled and howled with it. We had to wear galoshes, which were kept with our outdoor shoes, lacrosse sticks and hockey sticks and tennis racquets and cricket bats, in a dreadful cellar. We automatically knocked the cockroaches out of our shoes before putting them on, and squelched the beasts underfoot. I lost my galoshes. Miss Sadler told me to go and find them. I said I couldn't find them, because they were lost. Miss Sadler said that it was impossible to lose galoshes if they were properly marked, and that if mine weren't properly marked, it was an offence. I said they were properly marked, but I had lost them. She said she knew me, I had not lost my galoshes at all, I was keeping them from her. I denied it. (Why was Miss Sadler so passionately fond of my galoshes?) She gave me an Order Mark for impertinence, and an hour on the Disgrace Bench. A few days later, I found my galoshes in somebody's else's locker. The relief was so immense that I burst into tears.

In the vast dining-room, there were long refectory tables and a raised dais, on which sat Miss Flood, other senior mistresses, sometimes the head girl, one or two favoured prefects, and the visiting clergy. Miss Flood rang a little bell for Grace at the beginning and end of each meal, and in emergencies. We were not allowed to ask for things to be passed to us. I was not only below the salt, but never got any. We had tin mugs to drink out of, which made the already mineral water taste of lead. One day I found a worm in my mince. It was an authentic worm, wriggling about in the thin gravy. I screamed quite loudly. The bell rang; I was ordered out of the dining-room. Miss Sadler's view was that there could not possibly have been a worm in my mince. 'I've never heard of such a thing,' she said. Neither had I. As a punishment, I was made to wear my Junior School pinafore to meals, to show everyone what an untruthful little pig I was.

At the beginning of my second year, I ran away.

My father had by now begun to suffer terribly from arthritis, sciatica, protests from his body, and was so heavy that it was increasingly difficult for him to move about. He went everywhere by car, hunched over the wheel, saluting his parishioners with a gesture that was half gracious, half insulting. His Standard or Humber or Morris (he was never satisfied, continually unfaithful) was his mistress and true companion, escaping with him to Sheffield and Nottingham, accompanying him on long, aimless drives over the moors. He was in his mid-fifties, and almost friendless.

There was a pleasant, gentle schoolmaster called Mr Bye, who lived far away in, I think, Tunbridge Wells. My father called him Bye, and they may have corresponded a little. There was also a strange man who looked like Malcolm Muggeridge would look in a few years' time, a Machiavellian gnome. He had a Scots name, Mac-something, and was a mystery. My father said, for a short while, that he was a friend. But he assaulted a choirboy or Boy Scout, or both, embezzled the church funds (my father had made him a church warden), and disappeared. My father's fellow clergymen were, of course, impossible. The doctor was amiable, but stupid. My father was incapable of being friends with women, and in any case my mother always captured them first, stupid or smart, attractive or plain, provided they were middle class and over thirty, or working class and any age. 'There's not a single intelligent person in the place,' he would groan. He might as well, he said, live on a desert island.

But there was, from time to time, me. His study was thick with stale tobacco smoke. If I had to go in there (why did my mother send me? Because she didn't want to go herself), I couldn't get away. He mauled me without tenderness. One day I squirmed off his lap and ran, ran into the garden, the air. We had a tennis game, a ball on a long piece of elastic, strung from a pole. I picked up a racquet and began to hit the ball in a blind fury, the ball was my father. He came out into the garden and stood watching me. His face was red and, in so far as the construction of his face allowed, simpering. I hit the ball at him, wanting to hit him; but it sprang back on the elastic, hitting me.

Using the same formidable power of his loneliness, he had begun to assault me mentally as well as physically. Perhaps 'assault' sounds too strong a word for this, but any twelve-year-old who has sat, captive, for hours at a time in an airless room listening to a man who discovers a new key to the universe at least twice a week, experiences a violent verbal attack, and is assaulted. Perhaps he thought he was bringing me up; something which, according to my mother, had always been done extremely badly, leaving me little hope. I think he was using me, just as he did when he pulled me on to his knee and fumbled in my knickers. But in some ways I find it harder to forgive; I believe what he said, but knew, by now, that what he did was furtive and unworthy and indisputably wrong.

Anyway, among other things, he had told me that I must always be free, always kick against the pricks and try to demolish brick walls; never, if I wanted his (curiously mixed with Jesus Christ's) approval, toe anybody else's line. He told me that marriage was the coffin of love, that I must never suffer from false modesty, and that life was like a gas fire. I had no idea what this last statement meant, and don't know, but have a very clear picture of the gas fire and a very strong feeling of its arid heat, so perhaps he was just saying that life was hell. He told me that all the mistresses at St Elphin's were frustrated spinsters and could never teach me how to be a Woman. He told me always to follow the devices and desires of my own heart, and that God had never existed. He told me that he loved me, and that I only had to call and he would be there. At this point I would try to get away on any pretext (there weren't many), but if I was tactless about it he would plunge into a terrible raging gloom that often lasted for days; there would be notes under my bedroom door, and dark rumblings of finishing it all. I never learned to be tactful, and soon came to treat his threat of suicide as just one more unkept promise and broken vow.

But at this time, trapped for a large part of the year between Miss Sadler and Miss Flood, I was rather proud of him; even, perhaps, of his sexual eccentricities. The other fathers of the Daughters of the Clergy were extremely dull, however safe. They wore black and said Grace and had plaintive voices; they had puny appetites and live in dingy houses with photographs of their theological colleges on the walls. When I told my few friends at school what my father believed – I wasn't altogether truthful about what he did – they snickered and giggled and were astounded. I felt superior. In my intense homesickness, exiled among what my father had assured me were spiritual foreigners, fresh from my holiday lessons in how to be a revolutionary, I decided that the least I could do was to make him proud of me. Therefore – and because I had been given a Conduct Mark for talking after the Prayer Bell on the second night of the new term – I ran away.

I have thought about this story so much in my life, and written it, in various forms, so often; but it has never grown the patina of fiction, and in whatever guise it appears it never deviates from the implacable truth. The facts are simple. I went to bed in the dormitory as though everything were normal: then, when all the other Daughters were finally asleep, I dressed myself under the bed-

clothes, putting on my striped flannel shirt, navy serge skirt and lisle stockings. I put on my ink cotton kimono (embroidered, not printed, with parrots or flamingos) over my clothes, and crept to the lavatory along the dim landing, and went in and locked the door. It was a very small lavatory, on the top floor, but I thought there must be a fire-escape within jumping distance, as the building was scaffolded with fire-escapes which we used on our frequent fire-drills.

I folded the kimono and left it on the floor, opened the narrow frosted-glass window and, carrying my shoes with my teeth, squirmed out and dangled for the fire-escape, which was a bit further away than I had thought. It was a foggy night. I was very excited. I thought my father would be very excited too.

I walked to Matlock, maybe two miles, and saw two policemen standing under a street light. I asked them the way to Belper. They questioned me a little, but without enthusiasm. I said my name was Peggy Forbes (not altogether untrue – my father had recently affected the name Forbes-Fletcher, but no one could get used to it), and that my bicycle had broken down in Rowsley and I knew someone who lived on the Belper road. They showed me the way, quite friendly.

When I was outside Matlock, and realized I had about ten miles to go – the road was fairly desolate in those days – I felt a bit uneasy. The fog was quite thick. But I got a lift in a truck, and told the driver as few lies as possible. He dropped me at the bottom of the Vicarage drive, and I was glad to see there was a light still on in the hall.

The front door was locked, which I hadn't expected, so I rang the bell. My father was just going to bed. I heard him walk along the hall and through the porch, and he opened the door. I had been right – he was excited. He was so excited that he stuttered, like someone wrongfully accused of murder. My mother was asleep, and he wouldn't hear of waking her up. That was when he had bustled me into the sitting-room and shut the door.

I don't think it's too fanciful to say that that was the first time I realized that the world existed independently of myself. When I looked round the sitting-room, I had this shocking revelation – the fire had obviously been burning all evening, my father reading, my mother knitting: the fire was now nearly dead, and my mother's knitting bag was on her chair. Without my presence, let alone my permission, they had been eating, walking in and out of rooms, wearing the same clothes that they wore when I was with them, planning tomorrow, remembering yesterday. To them, it was *myself* who didn't exist. They had a life of their own. The existence of some microscopic part of me, some fastening or delicate hinge of identity, became uncertain from then on.

I had expected that we would talk – of course he would want to know what had happened – and that then my mother would make cocoa, and I would go to bed in my apple-green room. Not a bit of it. Our conversation, if it can be called that, was an outraged interrogation: who had seen me, who had I told? This was followed by an incomprehensible tirade about scandal, his position as vicar of the parish, the newspapers, my mother's health, my insane lack of consideration. I began to cry, which infuriated him more. For once, I would have been grateful to sit on his knee, but he didn't touch me. He telephoned Miss Flood in dismayed apology, bundled me into my mother's gardening coat – very old, brown, Harris tweed – and drove me straight back to St Elphin's.

We didn't talk on the way back. The police had been called out, and by that time were rapping on the Vicarage door, alarming my mother, thumping about in their boots. At school, there was a welcoming committee waiting on the steps, Miss Flood monumental in a dressing-gown, a number of women I didn't look at.

When we got into the hall, I threw a small fit, clinging to my father and yelling for help. He promised that if I would be quiet, he would come and say good-night to me before he left. I made him promise again, then went with a maid to a strange guest-room overlooking the drive. She saw me into bed and turned off the light. I waited, and an interminable time later heard my father's car start up, the headlights swept over the ceiling, and he drove away.

There seemed to be many conferences, and a great air of trouble. Miss Flood told me, quite gently, that I had been out of my mind ('not yourself' was, I think, her strange way of putting it). The question was, whether I should be expelled or not. It seemed to me quite irrational to expel someone for running away – surely the most appropriate punishment would have been to keep me there for ever? – but I realized they were not rational. My parents came once or twice – I saw the car in the drive, but was not allowed to meet them. I was never told what my mother's attitude was to it all, and I don't know why I have the feeling that she was more tolerant and less dismayed than anybody else; but I trust it. Behind her shield of appearances, she was far less conventional and tied to tradition than my father. If she had known, I think she would have made cocoa.

They decided not to expel me, but I had to sit on the Disgrace Bench every evening for the rest of the term. I sewed many chapel-kneelers. However, there were compensations. I obviously couldn't go back to sleep in the dormitory, where I might corrupt other girls. I was moved to the wing where the seniors slept in rows of little boxes, the walls not reaching the ceiling, like public lavatories. Each box had a big window, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a bed; by pulling out the drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe, it was possible to block the door. I had a private place again, where I could write and read and practice looking like Greta Garbo, a few of whose films I had now seen. My father preferred Elizabeth Bergner. I gave her a try, smirking and clenching the tip of my tongue between my teeth, but it was a failure. My bath nights were on Tuesdays and Fridays and my number – we were all numbered, like convicts or soldiers – remained unchanged – 122.

Miss Flood wondered whether I should be confirmed – perhaps it might stabilize me. (My brother, still at his minor public school, had been confirmed a year or so before in Sir Gilbert Scott's eight-year-old cathedral in Liverpool. We went to the service, and seeing him kneeling at the altar rail, far away in the distance, I had been curiously moved.) Meeting me in the hall one day, she congratulated me on not bearing any malice. I didn't know what she meant, but felt absolved. If it was going to make Miss Flood happy, I didn't mind getting confirmed, though my heart wasn't in it. Luckily, I caught the measles and was taken off to the sanatorium. Miss Flood said that she didn't think I was quite 'ready' for confirmation anyway.

Miss Sadler must have left by now, though I remember no roll of drums or salute of cannon at her departure. I think it was Miss Grenfell who took over, a relatively motherly person of reasonable

size. The sanatorium was rather cosy, like somebody's house. I enjoyed having the measles, but didn't expect it to change my life.

One morning, when I was getting better, I rolled out of bed and wandered over to the dressing-table to brush my hair. It wasn't actually a dressing-table, but a high, white-painted chest of drawers with a mirror standing on it. I suppose I glanced in it with my usual pessimism – no Garbo, no Bergner – and was immediately terrified. My reflection had straight eyes. I wasn't squinting. I yelled for Miss Grenfell, who came bustling and rustling in her nurses' uniform. I stared at her, shouting 'Look, look!' She had no patience with me. 'Your eyes are always straight when you wake up in the morning, dear. Now hurry up, breakfast's ready.'

I ran to the mirror every ten minutes that day: still straight. Next morning I approached it cautiously, hoping to catch it out: two obedient and perfectly balanced eyes stared back at me. At the end of the week, I threw away my glasses and emerged, at last, as my idea of a girl.

It was not so much that the world no longer saw me wearing glasses; it was the fact I no longer saw the world through glass that changed my view of things. Since my third birthday, my face had been dressed in wire and steel. Now, suddenly, it was naked. I cut myself a fringe with my sewing scissors, and threw out the hair-slide. I planned to become something I had not thought I could ever be – flighty. As I still weighed a good ten stone, this was an unlikely ambition.

I had, as we all had, many remote objects of passion: Gary Cooper, Inigo in Priestley's *Good Companions* (the character, as much as young John Gielgud in the film), many film stars whose names I forget – but they were all blond and bony, brave and shy – and, because of his liquid, almost edible eyes, Conrad Veidt. I certainly suffered and sighed over some older girls at school, though I don't remember who they were. When I went home for the holidays, the doctor's youngest son remarked that I was quite pretty.

His name was Denis, and he was at school with my brother, though very junior to him – perhaps he was even my brother's 'fag'. I had first met him coming off the school train in a welter of dropped luggage and clumsy greetings; he was about fifteen, with huge, uncoordinated hands and sticky blue eyes – infinitely prettier than I. He and his brother, Terence, both played the piano extremely well – they had two pianos in their room, I suppose in the hope that they would play duets. In fact, I don't think they liked each other very much. My father allowed Denis to play the organ in church; we would go there on weekday evenings, and my job was to pump the bellows in a dusty place behind the organ pipes. The electric light in the organ loft was a bright cabin in the cast, echoing darkness of the church. As well as Bach and Vivaldi, Denis played Gershwin, and the popular songs I loved. I pumped furiously, giving the instrument breath.

In the winter, we had been skating together, though I couldn't really skate. Denis pulled me along behind him on a broom handle, I wore a red turtleneck sweater. He had a motorbike, deafening, a thermos of water strapped to the pillion to throw over the engine when it threatened to blow up. I too rode the pillion, clinging like a limpet.

Shortly after my metamorphosis, we were taken to Sheffield on the train to see *Toad of Toad Hall* – there was a small group of 'children', or whatever we were meant to be at that time, and somebody must have been in charge. Whoever they were, they hadn't organised the expedition well, because we had to stand in the side aisle of the theatre for the whole performance. Denis stood behind me, and my back crept and tingled in a curious way. In the train coming back, we found a compartment to ourselves and fell in love, or, more accurately, together. When we got to Belper station, Denis suggested that we stayed on the train until it reached Derby. It felt more like entering Eden than being cast out.

So I had a boy-friend, though according to my mother that was a very 'common' term. He was not very reliable, but a great occupation; the slab of blond hair which he continually pushed away from his eyes, his clumsiness and sweetness, made him for many years my model of desirability.

About this time, my mother said to someone we met in the street, 'Yes, it's nice when they begin to grow up. They become more like friends.' I treasured this remark, often searching for it in times of trouble.

The school year always started on, or within a few days of, my birthday. This gave me very mixed feelings about my birthday. But on or around the day I was fourteen, I went back to find a revolution had taken place. It was the only beginning of term, I think, when I was not wretchedly homesick.

Miss Flood had retired to Glastonbury, and her place had been taken by Miss Mildred Hudson. I suppose Miss Hudson was relatively young, a tall, angular woman whose hair was always falling down; she wore sturdy crepe soles to her shoes, which squeaked on the parquet, silk stockings and tweed skirts and a crucifix. She was deranged as only a nun can be deranged. But to begin with she seemed like a saviour.

The whole place gleamed with fresh paint, there were muted prints hanging on the walls and the tin mugs had been replaced by glass tumblers. The Disgrace Bench had gone, and there was electric light in the labyrinthine passages, which previously had been gloomily lit with gas jets. There were a number of new teachers – young, bobbed women recently down from Girton or Lady Margaret Hall. They strode about the place in a boyish manner, smoked cigarettes in the staff room and sometimes became hysterical. One of them was Sheila Mary Taylor, whose job it was to drum Wordsworth and *The Merchant of Venice* into our dizzy heads. She was the first person ever to take my writing seriously, and wherever she may be – in graceful and contented retirement, I hope – I bless her. On Boat Race afternoons, when we all gathered to listen to the wireless, she would become very pale, savagely whispering 'In – Out!' and making wild rowing motions across her desk.

She had, Miss Hudson said gently, been told about me; we could, she was sure, work something out. Her pale eyes were full of love; she put her arm round me. Love, she said, was the answer. She would start praying for me right away. I was blessed.

When a fourteen-year-old gets attacked by Miss Hudson's form of religion, the attack has all the passion – though few of the compensations – of a major sexual experience. For a short while, Denis seemed very tame in comparison. *Via Crucis, Via Lucis* was my motto. A young priest commuted from Liverpool to prepare me for confirmation: he was a sunny, athletic man, who wore the three knots in the rope round his cassock, for chastity, celibacy and poverty. Between him, and Miss Hudson, and Jesus Christ, I was in a ferment. Poetry – or rather, words – began to flood the pages of my exercise books:

I brought to you the intellect that I had gleaned
Swiftly, haphazard, from the store of others' minds,
The fine and gilded thing I had disguised so well
And made believe was mine.
But this you took away and, pitying,
Threw to the rubbish, where it would not be despised.

Even my father began to get worried. I was confirmed, and initiated into the mysteries of the wafer and the wine. They didn't seem particularly mysterious. By the end of the term, my Anglo-Catholic mysticism was tinged with a certain doubt:

The atom yearned for greatness. Through the air
Gliding unhurried, with determination,
Swirling precisely in a shaft of sun,
Dancing unhurried, with determination,
Onward it came to earth.
The atom settled smoothly. Things unknown,
Unthought of, with a strange, clear intuition
Entered its self, and with a secret smile
It drifted on, with strange, clear intuition,
Past the quiet evening.

Eventually, the atom ceased to be.
I read no more. The story wearied me.

It is not my intention to quote much more of this disorganized verse, which at this time filled exercise books and crawled round the margins of essays on 'Intimations of Mortality' and the structure of corms. But I thought it said what I meant, even if I didn't quite know what that was. The title of the tale of the atom was 'Tohu-Va-Vohu', and I've no idea what that meant, either.

My mother had two diagnoses for any untoward display of feeling: one, that I was 'tired', and would feel better in the morning; the other, that it was 'the reaction'. It wasn't necessary for her to know what I was reacting to, or against: 'It's the reaction' was a perfectly sufficient explanation.

This is how she comforted herself during my long, and somewhat turbulent reaction against Miss Hudson and God. I'm not sure what made me change my heart (my mind had very little to do with it), but hope it was something to do with distaste. Perhaps, once more, it was the Nonconformist

conscience asserting itself. Miss Hudson's ecstasies, her candlelit Masses, her fervid prayers and rapt devotions, offended the Maggs in me. Anyway, I pretty soon became as passionate an agnostic as I had been a believer, and Miss Hudson mourned.

My Garden School ambitions for academic excellence had not been realized. There didn't seem to be much time for study, and in any case I suffered, in everything except English literature, from a kind of dyslexia. Figures meant absolutely nothing to me: I knew they should, and tried desperately, but why *a* should equal *b*, or why the sum of squares of the lengths of the sides of a right-angled triangle should be equal to the square of the length of the hypotenuse, I could never tell. Latin distressed me almost as much: nobody could explain its purpose, and no one spoke it. French seemed to make more sense, but I knew quite well, from Maurice Chevalier and from all those Nordic film stars, that a poor accent and a shaky grasp of grammar was a positive advantage in a foreign language. Science was interesting up to a point, but without mathematics it soon became as much of a mystery as everything else. History, as taught at St Elphin's, was bunk – nothing had ever happened in the world but a dreary succession of kings and queens, wars and treaties, Picts and Scots, Whigs and Tories, all with a date attached like a price tag. Geography was much better: I loved making maps and measuring longitude and latitude, shading the coniferous regions and areas of maximum rainfall; but geography, for some reason, was considered almost as inane a subject as domestic science, and I was too pig-headed to admit my enthusiasm. I excelled at scripture, because I could write fiction, and pounded the piano with great determination. But my chances of passing School Certificate seemed, on the face of it, slim.

In the meanwhile, I took up living where it had left off with the advent of Miss Hudson. Denis wrote me short, spidery letters with crosses on the bottom. I replied with pages of lyrical prose. I explored the nearby Dales with my new friend, Kay Edmunds, a chirpy matronly little girl from Aberystwyth; we tucked our gym tunics into our knicker legs, took off our shoes and stockings, wore our grey felt hats at a raking angle. I had won a packet of ten Gold Flake cigarettes at a church fete; my father encouraged me, and I was now puffing and coughing like an expert. I played the lead in *Berkeley Square*, trying to look as much like Leslie Howard as possible (it was not possible). Miss Hudson got more and more desperate. In a final, hysterical effort to bring me back to Jesus, she excommunicated me from the school chapel. I could lie snug in bed while everyone else trailed off to their devotions – 'You!', came the very faint echo of my mother's voice, 'You always get what you want!'

I really thought I did. But sometimes it went wrong. One dreary holiday afternoon, with my parents sound asleep and Denis, I suppose, in one of his moods, I rang up a Mr Fox at his office. I had danced with Mr Fox at the Rotary Ball, to which I had accompanied my father; Mr Fox was at least forty-five, heavily married, and had a nasty little black moustache. 'I must see you immediately,' I breathed, trying it on. He told me to meet him at the end of the drive in quarter of an hour. I put on a new dress, grey wool with black stripes, cut on the cross and very (I thought) slinky. I met Mr Fox in order to tell him my thoughts and feelings which, in the awful silence of a Vicarage afternoon, had seemed impossible to contain.

Of course that was not Mr Fox's idea. He drove me up to a fairly deserted place called Strutt's Lane, and embraced me heartily. I didn't enjoy it at all. It was like having an old toothbrush in one's mouth. I asked him to take me home, and swore not to tell anyone.

But because Mr Fox was now my enemy, and I was back among friends, of course I told – though only my mother. I did much more than tell: I wept and howled and demanded Denis and made such a scene that she, poor bewildered woman, must have thought I'd been raped. Since she could not bring herself to ask me what, specifically, had happened, and I was in far too much of a state to consider such trivialities, she may well have come to that conclusion. 'It's the reaction,' she said, and gave me an aspirin.

I was moving far into my mother's camp; my father was by now almost completely isolated, emerging only to pounce and rummage and run away again with his tail between his legs. If I were a painter, this is how I would have painted him.

Perhaps the incident with Mr Fox made my mother realize that I was growing up. Perhaps she thought (I can hear the words) that I knew more than was good for me. In any event, we were walking round the rose garden one evening, arm in arm – our physical contacts were so rare that I think I remember most of them. Suddenly she asked, 'What do Lesbians actually *do*?' It was both a proud and an awful moment, because she had asked me a question and I had no idea of the answer.

She had many loyal and affectionate lady friends, my unrelated aunts, and when she was with them she had always seemed like a stranger. Sometimes I preferred this stranger to my mother, particularly when her face flushed and crumpled into paroxysms of laughter. At the time of her question, she was having a more than usually romantic friendship with an intelligent, humorous, angular woman called Susan. My father, floundering in the shallows of psychopathology, tragically jealous, had decided (perhaps quite rightly) that his wife was a Lesbian. My mother was beginning to talk to me much more, and I heard confused stories of him cutting off the light, throwing potatoes at Susan, behaving like a maniac. Certainly he arrived without warning at St Elphin's and drove me off to a dramatic tea in Sheffield, where he threw my mother's wedding-ring down on the table and told me that it was worthless, their marriage was over. (He did not remember, apparently, that marriage was the coffin of love.) I was extremely pleased. I thought I would enjoy life without him. When I got back to school I went straight to the recreation room and, probably weeping a little, confided in my friends, who were properly impressed.

Unfortunately nothing happened. My mother continued to see Susan, and to behave with uncharacteristic girlishness, laughing and blushing and singing about the place; they were on idyllic holidays to Uncle Leonard's love-nest and exchanged tokens of affection and had rather interesting conversations about books and nature.

About this time, my father booked himself into a nudist colony in St Albans. He commanded me to go with him, and was furious when I refused. But he found nothing among the dripping trees except a group of elderly ladies dressed in spectacles, knitting scarves for their less enlightened relatives. He weighed over sixteen stone, and there was much of him to suffer. He spent one night in the chalet he had booked for three weeks, and came home. For the rest of those summer holidays he wandered naked about the shrubbery at dawn, a great, pale, disconsolate shape in the gritty light, looking as though he were searching for something.

And I, too, was jealous of Susan. It didn't seem proper that my mother should be so merry and irresponsible. I was beginning to spend a lot of time in the kitchen, chatting and gossiping, while my mother cooked. One day I was sitting on the highest rung of the kitchen steps, putting away bottled fruit in a top cupboard; my mother, down below, was prattling on about something Susan had recently said or done. I suddenly yelled, 'You only think about Susan! You never think about *us*!' (or was it 'me'?), and skidded down the steps and rushed out into the garden, sobbing.

Another woman might have followed me out, tried to talk to me. My mother behaved as though the incident had never happened. But Susan did ask me to tea, and sitting on the floor in front of her gas fire, in a rather untidy, collegiate kind of room, asked me sympathetic questions about my writing, and what I wanted to be when I grew up (Virginia Woolf or Ginger Rogers? I could never be sure). She didn't win me over, but I learned to put up with her.

The years between fourteen and sixteen are a lifetime; one's fifteenth year alone goes slower than a decade. September (my birthday), Christmas, Easter, the summer; and my birthday again. I was still officially in love with Denis, but it didn't seem to get very far. For a short while, my father lost his head entirely, and fell in love with me.

This was a very different situation. He mooned, wrote poetry, behaved far more like a lovesick youth than Denis did. It was not entirely unpleasant, so long as he kept his distance. I think he was dreaming of a new life in which he could escort me to the theatre and the ballet (where, God knows) and hear people say, 'There goes Mr Fletcher with his beautiful daughter, she dotes on him, you know." I think he was dreaming of becoming gentle, romantic, even protective. It was far too late. Since the night he had taken me back to St Elphin's, my hatred of him had felt implacable.

My brother left school. One evening he championed me in an argument I was having with my father, who threw a cushion at him. I began to have a dim picture of my brother in my head, instead of in a photograph: at that time he seemed very pale, his face set in a kind of sickness or fury. I wrote poetry as though I were sweating it, covering reams of paper with damp, smudged lines. In a bush shelter in Aberystwyth I read this homely verse:

> When apples are ripe
> They're ready for plucking,
> When a girl is sixteen
> She's ready for fucking.

I could hardly believe my eyes, and never told anyone, even Kay Edmunds, what I had read. I certainly felt ready for something, but couldn't put a name to it.

There were black months of studying, of avoiding Miss Hudson's recriminating eye and my father's lugubrious passion. It had been decided that in the total absence of mathematics or science, I should take botany and musical theory for my School Certificate – possibly one of them passed for a kind of science. I liked flowers and I liked music, but to dissect or analyse either seemed a waste of time.

Nevertheless, I scraped through somehow. I even got Honours in English literature and scripture, though the cadences of Shakespeare and the Bible had very little effect on my style, which was remotely influenced by Celine, dos Passos, and the lyrics of Noel Coward. Mostly, I wasn't influenced by anything but a kind of exhilarating rage. My father said I must train to be a secretary, since that was always a start; my mother said nothing. I left St Elphin's without saying good-bye to Muss Hudson, or anybody else; and never, except in dreams, gave it a backward glance."

Left: St Elphin's School for the Daughters of the Clergy, 1934. PF centre back.

Left: PF 1930

Right: 'I threw away my glasses and emerged, at last, as my idea of a girl.'

WINNER OF THE WHITBREAD PRIZE, 1979

The first volume of Penelope Mortimer's outstanding and memorable autobiography with, as Gabrielle Annan wrote, its 'haunting, gripping vision' takes her through childhood, observing her ill-matched parents with a calm understanding and forbearance to early marriage and motherhood in Hitler's Vienna.

'Written in that spirit of truthfulness, respect and sad indulgence enjoyed by Gosse … at the start of 'Father and Son.'

Hilary Spurling, *The Observer*

'The transitions from hard-edge reflection and soft-focus recall give her book a special kind of liveliness … leaving a taste for more.'

Gabrielle Annan, *New Statesman*

ABOUT TIME appears in paperback to coincide with the publication by Weidenfeld & Nicolson of its sequel ABOUT TIME TOO in hardback.

£7.99 NET

price in UK only

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
The Orion Publishing Group
Orion House
5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London, WC2H 9EA

ISBN 0-297-81397-8

9 780297 813972