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A
DISTANT
PROSPECT

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ANNETTE YOUNG

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For my Mother,
Margaret Lyne Nelson née Cameron

And my Grandmother,
Yvonne Lyne Cameron née Murray
(1906–1994)

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*To each his sufferings: all are men,
Condemned alike to groan;
The tender for another's pain,
The unfeeling for his own.
Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
Since Sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.*

Thomas Gray
'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College'

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1

It was the third time that morning Daid had called. After breakfast he called to remind me not to dally getting ready. He called again when I started playing my 'cello, informing me of my train's departure. Now he called and knocked at my bedroom door and announced that as far as he was aware, the Good Lord would not be stopping the sun for my sake as He did for Joshua. I sighed, unscrewed my bow and reluctantly laid down my instrument. Bach would have to wait till later. I reached for the cover and fitted my 'cello inside before resting it carefully back on the floor. Then I swivelled around in the chair, leant across, and gripped the end of my bed. I pulled myself up hard to standing position. As I did, I made a tentative glance at my reflection in the cracked glass of my wardrobe mirror. Today I was dressed for school in a black box-pleated tunic, a not very white shirt and a black and white tie.

There had been precious little money to spare on that uniform for most of it had been taken up in the purchase of not one, but two pairs of boots. The boots, as usual, had been custom-made by the orthopaedic man and had cost a small fortune, whereas the uniform had been acquired second or third hand for a few pennies. So, unlike my brand new boots – solid, shiny and sensible, their laces not yet frayed – my tunic was still redolent with the smell of the vinegar that had been used in the attempt to remove ancient stains and three old hemlines. My shirt should have been white. Instead it was more parchment in colour, the fabric soft from years of scrubbing. Somehow the collar and cuffs had survived another starching, and the shirt, despite its aged condition, had been ironed to perfection.

'Luighseach!'

Daid knocked again. I opened my bedroom door and followed my father into the corridor.

He looked me over. There was a mixture of pride and concern on his face. Then he relaxed somewhat and ran his hand through his hair which typically was a tousled mass of charcoal locks, and a stark contrast to the pristine neatness of his trim-fitting waistcoat and pinstriped trousers, striped shirt and necktie, and round, silver rimmed glasses.

'Tis the first day of school, lassie,' he smiled. 'Will you not have your photograph taken?'

Daid should have known better. I shook my head.

'But 'tis a special day to be sure, Luighseach,' Daid continued in his gentle brogue.

Again I shook my head, looked down at my boots and sighed.

'Tis the camera's set up in the parlour there. Will you sit for a portrait, lass? Head and shoulders and nought more than that. You can take your glasses off if

you want.’

‘Take my glasses off? What good would that do? It wouldn’t change the rest of me.

‘I’m thinking Sister Ignatius would like a photo of yourself in your uniform. And did you write to thank her for the help she gave you to win the scholarship?’ I had not written and Daid knew it. ‘What’s more ’tis myself would like a new picture of my lass to put on my desk in the studio. ’Tis more than eight years old, you know, the one that sits there.’

But I liked that photograph, and if I had any say in it, it was not going to be replaced by what would undoubtedly be an inferior piece. I refused a fourth time.

Daid, in resignation, took my blazer from the hallstand and helped me put it on. He picked up my satchel and fitted it over my head, arranging my long black braids so that they fell down my front instead of being thrown back over my shoulders. My hat, too, he set carefully on my crown. I stretched my hands into a pair of black gloves. Together we walked to the front door. Daid took some holy water from the font near the doorpost and made the sign of the cross on my forehead. He stood at the top of our front steps and watched me leave.

‘Will you not let me drive you, Luighseach?’ he asked.

I carefully worked my way down one, two, three, four steps. On the fifth, however, I stumbled. Before I even realised I was falling my father was at my side. He steadied me and helped me down to the gate.

‘Bíodh lá maith agat, a Luighseach,’ he said quietly. ‘You’ll be all right, will you not?’

‘Aye, I will, Daid,’ I replied.

And so it was, one February morning in 1928 that I was on my own for the very first time since arriving in Sydney from Ireland a little over seven years ago. It was not yet eight o’clock and already the air was soaked with heat. Slowly I began my walk up Watkin Street, which was the street where we lived.

Had I been able, I would have run past Mrs Murphy’s house which was next door to our own. But I could not and I prepared myself for the inevitable. Sure enough, I heard the front door open and my name called.

I stopped.

‘Lucy,’ Mrs Murphy waddled down the path. ‘I was hoping I’d see you before you left. And don’t you look smart in your uniform! Who would have thought you’d ever be off to school and on a scholarship too! Why, I remember when you first came home from the hospital. Nineteen twenty-two it was, two months after dear Mr Murphy, God rest his soul, passed away. The good Lord took him on St Joseph’s day, you know, so he was well taken care of. He always had a strong devotion to good St Joseph, Mr Murphy did. My, what a frail, thin little lass you were with those braces on your legs. And now look at you, fifteen years old – I never thought you’d grow so tall. But child—’ she paused. ‘You’re only wearing a brace on one leg.’

It was typical of Mrs Murphy to notice that. If Daid had noticed, he had wisely kept silent. But Mrs Murphy made it her business to talk about everything.

'I'm not needing the other calliper,' I replied, 'for I'm walking fine without it now.'

'And what does the doctor say about that, dear?'

The doctor did not know.

'Well, I hope you don't come to harm. It's a wonder your dear father's let you go out like that. Dear me,' she sighed, and pulled something from her apron pocket. 'Now Lucy, I've kept this for you. It's a devotion to St Jude. You pray to him for protection and strength.'

She pressed the holy picture into my hand.

'He's bound to help you,' Mrs Murphy continued. 'Why only the other day, I was talking to old Mrs Quinn down the lane and she said that since praying to St Jude her rheumatism's far better. Then there's Arthur Harrison who was gassed in the War. Well, St Jude's seen that he's finally on the mend. So you can be sure he'll listen to a crippled child like you, dear.'

This syllogism, such as it was, disclosed the pith of Mrs Murphy's argument and purpose.

'And what is *that* to do with it, I'm asking?'

'But Lucy, the sick and the needy are always in God's mind.'

'Are they now, Mrs Murphy? Well, if the Almighty's arranged things so, there be no need for yourself, St Jude or anyone else who's walked the face of the earth to be troubling on it.'

And sending a glare in the woman's direction, I scrunched up the devotion and silently challenged her as to whether or not I would actually throw it away. I pulled my leg into line and resumed my hike up the hill towards King Street.

'Mother of God, that girl!' I heard Mrs Murphy mutter as she waddled back down the path. Only when I was satisfied I was out of her sight did I open my satchel and stuff the devotion inside.

The Rugby Hotel stood at the corner of Watkin and King Streets and, when I finally reached it, I leant against the wall to catch my breath. St Dominic's, the school I was to attend, was in Strathfield and to get there I had to take a train. Newtown station was still a long walk away. Down King Street I wandered amidst a hubbub of wheels and hoofs and trousers and skirts and shoes and bells and horns. At Daid's studio, I paused again to rest my legs and studied the photographs exhibited in the front window. Some were Daid's and others were the work of Mr Birstall, his associate. Thomas' book and music store was a few more doors along, and there I spent time peering through the glass, trying to make out the tune of a song displayed in the window. Then there was the butcher's which did not serve Catholics, and Bray's music where the 'cello lived. I ate an orange outside Bray's.

Finally I arrived at the top of the railway stairs in time to watch my train steam under the bridge and down the track. Another locomotive chugged by. I edged down endless steps and was saved from what might have been serious falls by a

sudden show of hands and words of caution. Two fast trains sped past before, with unsolicited assistance, I boarded the slow train to Strathfield and took refuge in a corner of the carriage.

The train rounded the track past St Joseph's church. A little further along was the convent. I could not see it from my carriage seat, but it was where my education had been taken care of for the last few years. Sister Mary Ignatius, a Sister of Charity, was the nun who had been given the responsibility. With considerable vigour she had dutifully bent my mind round the arts and sciences. That was, until she abruptly announced that she was soon to take care of a group of postulants.

'As for yourself,' she remarked in her forthright Cork accent the day she broke the news, 'You ought to sit for a scholarship. It would be good for you.'

So was castor oil. As far as I was concerned, I was required to do too many things that were 'good' for me.

'Well, and what will you be doing with the life God's given you?' she probed. 'Will you work in your father's shop when you've finished your studies?'

I had never given the matter any thought. According to Sister Ignatius, it was about time I did.

'If you received a scholarship, you could sit for matriculation,' she continued. 'If you matriculate well, you could win a scholarship to the varsity. If you go to the varsity, you'll be able to study the mathematics you want to study. You'll get ahead. You need to get ahead. It's important.'

However obstinate I may have appeared regarding her lofty ambitions, Sister Ignatius was assured of one thing: I could not resist aceing a test. So she prepared me for the scholarship. I sat the examination and was duly rewarded.

I should have been proud of my success. Everyone else was. But for me the achievement was tainted with the prospect that I was to join my peers in the pursuit of learning. That was quite another matter entirely. Aside from very brief exchanges after Sunday Mass, I had precious little to do with other girls. I pulled my tunic further over my knees and hugged my satchel. A lady sitting in the opposite seat smiled at me and I looked away. With each stop I grew more apprehensive. By the time the train pulled in at Strathfield, I was physically sick.

To my relief I found St Dominic's deserted. Had I arrived punctually, I knew the grounds would have been swarming with girls: staring, gossiping, giggling girls.

Now I was faced with the task of finding and entering my class.

A door to the right of the central archway directed me to an office. I entered and stood at the desk. An elderly nun came to my assistance.

'May I help you, child?'

'You may.'

'And you are?'

‘My name is Luighseach Ní Sruitheáin.’

‘You’re the lame girl, aren’t you?’ She glanced over her pince-nez, across the desk and down to my boots. ‘Tut, tut. Sister Bellarmine, the head mistress, has been waiting for you this past half hour. Why are you so late?’

‘I missed my train.’

The nun shook her head. ‘I’m afraid Sister Bellarmine has gone to teach now. What a pity! She wanted to introduce you personally.’

That may have been Sister Bellarmine’s desire, but it was definitely not mine.

‘I can find my class myself, you know.’

‘Well, you’re going to have to now. Let me see, you’re in the fourth form. South wing, top of the stairs, turn right, first right.’

‘The south wing was it you said?’

‘Through the main archway,’ she explained in a tone that suggested she had given those directions many a time. ‘Across the quadrangle, up the stairs, turn right, first right.’

I waited awhile outside the classroom and took as long as I could to remove the gloves which were glued to my fingers with sweat.

I knocked.

‘Enter.’

The voice had to repeat the command before I had courage enough to turn the handle. I opened the door and pushed my head inside. Facing me was a beach of desks strewn with seaweed clumps of girls in tunics.

‘How may I help you, child?’ A nun, rather like a great white walrus, occupied a desk on a platform.

‘Don’t be shy so,’ she tilted with a gentle smile.

I swallowed.

‘Gabh mo leithséal. An bhfuil—’

‘Why bless me! You speak the Irish!’ exclaimed the nun, stopping short the chattering girls. ‘Come inside, come inside! Welcome to this holy place.’

Now came the dreaded moment in which I had to stand before my class. Sickening, I removed my hat and sidled inside, and in doing so revealed everything I wished so desperately to hide. Twelve pairs of eyes stared at my shiny brown boots, noting how different they were to the shoes with straps fixed to the twelve pairs of legs which were crossed under the desks. They stared at my left boot with its built up heel. They stared at my legs, long and spindly, and at the calliper with its metal shafts and leather straps and buckles. They stared at the black, hand-knitted woollen stockings I wore to stop the straps rubbing against my skin, and they began to whisper.

‘I’m afraid it’s only Sister Comgall in the convent who speaks Irish here,’ the nun explained. ‘Now, I am Sister Mary Magdalene. Who might you be?’

‘It’s Luighseach I am. Luighseach Ní Sruitheáin,’ I answered.

Sister Mary Magdalene perused her roll then eyed me quizzically.

‘I’m afraid we don’t have anyone by that name in this class, child,’ she apologised.

‘But ’twas in the office they told me the fourth form it was I had—’

Sister gently raised her hand to halt me.

‘Be calm, dear child. We do, however, have a Lucy Straughan,’ she said. ‘Now would that be yourself?’

They had anglicised my name.

‘Then welcome, Lucy,’ Sister proceeded. ‘You will find your desk in the centre there,’ and she indicated the spot with her ruler.

‘Can— can I not sit here?’ I asked, indicating the desk pressed against the wall, closest to where I was standing.

‘No, no, my child,’ smiled the nun. ‘That desk is being sent for repair. Your desk is the one I pointed out.’

It was always hard to begin walking without holding some form of support, and it was even harder when my legs were tired. I looked anxiously at the nun. She gave me an anxious smile in return while her eyes gently encouraged me to my seat. Slowly, I lifted my right leg high from the knee in order to clear my foot. Then I swung my shorter left leg, held rigid by the calliper, from the hip. Lift and swing, lift and swing, I limped towards my seat. The nun requested someone to help me. A small, slender girl volunteered. She stood and pulled out my chair for me.

‘I can do it myself,’ and I took the seat without as much as a glance at her, fixed my braced leg into a bent position and stared at the pattern of woodgrain spirals on the desk.

There was an equation for spirals... Did any of the woodgrains make a golden spiral?

Sister Mary Magdalene resumed her lesson. It appeared to be a history lesson on the Counter-Reformation and the Jesuit saints had been selected for study. When at last I had the courage to look up from my spirals, I noted the various dates and names listed on the board: St Ignatius Loyola, St Francis Xavier, St Aloysius Gonzaga; the Spanish Inquisition: 1481.

I mulled over that number. 1481 was an interesting number. It was a prime number. Were there any other prime numbers on the board? I began to look over the dates and do calculations: if the sum of the digits was divisible by three a number would not be prime. Were any numbers divisible by seven? Eleven? Thirteen? What other numbers were there?

The lesson continued. ‘Now who can tell me about St Peter Canisius?’ Sister asked the class. ‘Yes, Della, that is quite correct. He was only recently canonised and his canonisation is a reminder that God wants us all to live holy lives. Now, do you all remember the Lutherans?’

I continued with my calculations. That was, until Sister Mary Magdalene decided it was time I answered a few questions.

‘Lucy?’ she called.

I looked up. There were giggles. Clearly this was not the first time the nun had called my name. I blushed.

'1597,' prompted Sister. 'Could you tell me what happened?'

I gazed at the number that was now written on the board. The class silently waited for my reply. It seemed that everyone knew the answer I should give. But I did not know anything that happened in 1597. I only knew about the number one thousand, five hundred and ninety-seven.

'Tis a Fibonacci number,' I said.

The bell sounded. Sister concluded her class with a Hail Mary and left the room. I had not the chance to fully stand with rest of the class, and had barely taken my seat when I was encircled.

'A what number?' asked one girl who was very pretty and fair-haired.

'If ye're needing to know, Miss Frances Mahony,' sounded a shrill Ulster-Scots voice. Everyone turned in the direction of the diminutive nun who stood at the door. 'A Fibonacci number is a number which is the sum of two preceding numbers in a Fibonacci sequence, the pattern being 0,1,1,2,3,5,8 and so forth. Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb, Jesus.'

The class demurely prayed the response, although vague undertones of 'Fibonacci' and 'new girl' could be heard.

'Our Lady of the Rosary.'

'Pray for us.'

'St Dominic.'

'Pray for us.'

'Now, given that Miss Mahony would not be likely to have dabbled in pure mathematics over the course of the summer, I can only assume that such rare interest in the subject owes itself to another source. You there,' the nun adjusted a pair of round, black spectacles and eyed me carefully. 'Would ye be Miss Fibonacci perhaps?'

'Oh no, Sister Augustine,' piped up Frances Mahony. 'That's Lissie.'

'You don't say it like that, Fanny,' corrected a large, heavy-set girl. 'It's Lushie.'

'Lushie? That's not how *she* said it, Kathleen,' a third girl interposed.

They would have bickered over my name *ad infinitum* had not Sister quickly restored order with several raps of her ruler.

'To be sure Miss Fibonacci can speak for herself, Mary Byrne,' said Sister Augustine to the third girl. 'Well, is there a tongue in yer head?' she asked me. 'And will ye not stand when ye're spoken to?'

'She can't stand up, Sister Augustine,' Kathleen explained before I had chance either to stand or speak for myself. 'She's crippled.'

At this, I clenched my jaw and pushed my hands hard on my desk. It took me three attempts, but stand I did.

'Ah-ha, now ye must be Miss Lucy Straughan,' remarked the nun who

pronounced my surname with a heavy guttural emphasis on the last syllable instead of softly blending the vowels. 'Pray and what will ye tell us about the Fibonacci sequence?'

Immediately I replied, my response revealing my own softer West Country accent. 'Mathematically, the Fibonacci sequence would be represented as $F_n = F_{n-1} + F_{n-2}$. 'Tis a numerical sequence whereby the ratio of two consecutive numbers converges on the golden ratio. You can see fibonacci patterns in nature, in the arrangement of petals in flowers or branches on trees. The sum of—'

'Very good indeed,' remarked Sister Augustine. 'Ye may sit now, Miss Straughan.'

I glanced sideways. Fat Kathleen looked at me with a very perplexed expression. Now who was the cripple, I thought, as I sat.

Sister Augustine wrote the sequence on the board and explained how it occurred in the petal configuration I had mentioned.

'The sequence underlines,' said she, 'the order that exists in this world, which as ye all should know is one of St Thomas' five demonstrations of the existence of God. I beg yer pardon, Lucy Straughan?' the nun jutted her angular chin in my direction.

I had not expected Sister Augustine to hear what I had muttered. Again I was made to stand.

'Well?' inquired Sister Augustine.

'But what of the disorder?' I blurted.

'Disorder was it, ye said?' she echoed.

'Aye, I did. 'Tis all very well to talk of order showing God's existence. But what of the disorder? How does that show God exists now, can you tell me that?'

'Disorder?' queried Sister Augustine, shaking her head and suppressing the surrounding giggles. 'Our God is not a God of disorder. There's no such thing as disorder, Lucy Straughan. Only a more profound order.'

'But—'

No further discussion was permitted, for Sister immediately directed the lesson towards the quadratic formula.

The next bell apparently signalled morning tea. Curiously, the class left me alone and walked out in groups, making comments about 'spastic' and 'Sister Augustine' and 'maths' the while.

'Care to join us?' asked a girl whom I recognised as the one who earlier had offered to help me.

I shook my head.

'I suggest you go outside though. If a prefect sees you in here, you'll run the risk of a detention.'

I told her I cared not for going outside and that such things as prefects and detentions could go to the devil.

'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

She disappeared. I turned the page of my mathematics book and embarked on the homework that had been set, until an older, red-headed girl ousted me from the room.

The following lessons suffered such a prolonged discussion of my name and physical predicament that I regretted ever being born, let alone sit for a scholarship. Save for lunch, which I also spent inside until ejected, the day passed in a regular pattern. White-robed nuns pounded their lessons on an increasingly sleepy shore of students. Between each wave of instruction, however, the girls popped out of their seats like gangs of crabs and scuttled across the room in pursuit of pleasure. Otherwise, like pippies, they burrowed deep in gossip and stayed submerged until wrenched to the surface by the next instructress. I, meanwhile, remained stiff as a pole, fixed to my seat, firmly resisting and resenting even the tiniest semblance of attention.

The last bell sounded. The 'Sub Tuum Praesidium' was prayed and girls and mistress drifted away.

Finally, silence.

The sultriness with which the day began had not diminished and by the time I alighted from the train, the sky had become a threatening blue-grey. Dollops of summer rain flopped onto my boots as I trudged homeward. I opened the gate, and the rain wept down a thick, silver curtain.

Our house was dark and silent as always. I hung my blazer and hat on the hallstand, opened my bedroom door and dragged my chair to the foot of my bed. I picked up my 'cello from its place, removed the bow and cover, flung the cover on the bed, sat in the chair and slotted the spike into a groove in the floorboards. The bow I tightened with six deft twists and rubbed with rosin. Taking a deep breath, I removed my glasses, closed my eyes and sighed into the strings. One by one the fingers of my left hand planted themselves on the fingerboard and rocked into a vibrato. It was pouring now and I thudded my fingers in a series of chromatics, each sequence progressing higher and higher. My bow began to sweep across the strings and I felt my shoulders loosen. My 'cello and I were one great muscle of sound, and we mourned with all our might through Bach's D minor Prelude while outside the thunder rolled and heavy rain pounded the roof.

Daid returned. A brief question and the reply that all was fine sealed our conversation. Tea was had, Rosary prayed, homework done, legs massaged, and I was left atop my bed to prepare for the next day's encounter.