

Dear Mrs Dunkley

IN 1952, when I was nine and my name was Helen Ford, I came from Ocean Grove State School, where the teachers were kindly country people, to a private girls' school in Geelong. I was put into your grade five class.

You were very thin, with short black hair and hands that trembled. You wore heels, a black calf-length skirt and a black jacket with a nipped-in waist.

We had Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia at home, and I thought I was pretty good at General Knowledge.

'In what year was the Great Plague of London?'

Up flew my hand. '1665.'

You stared at me. 'I *beg* your pardon?' You mimicked my flat, nasal, state school accent. You corrected it. You humiliated me. I became such a blusher that other kids would call out, 'Hey Fordie! What colour's red?'

I was weak at arithmetic. On such weakness you had no mercy. 'Stand up, you great MOON CALF.' You made us queue at your

table to show you our hopelessly scratched-out and blotted exercise books. Close up you emitted a faint and terrifying odour: a medicinal sort of perfume. On your lapel twinkled a sinister marcasite brooch.

Every morning, first thing after the bell, you would write in chalk on the blackboard the numerals of the clock face, then take the long wooden pointer and touch the figures, one by one, in random order, in a slow, inexorable rhythm. We had to add them silently in our heads, and have the answer ready when you stopped. The name of this daily practice was THE DIGIT RING.

You made us keep our hands on the desks so we couldn't count on our fingers, but I learnt to make my movements too small to be visible: to this day I can add up on my fingers like lightning. But the psychic cost of the digit ring was high. My mother had to wake me from nightmares. 'You were calling out in your sleep,' she'd say. 'You were screaming out "The digit ring! The digit ring!" What on earth,' she asked innocently, 'is a digit ring?'

Dear Mrs Dunkley. You taught us not only arithmetic. One day, making us all sick with shame that our mothers had neglected their duties, you taught grade five to darn a sock. You taught us to spell, and how to write a proper letter: the address, the date, the courteous salutation, the correct layout of the page, the formal signing off. But most crucially, you taught us grammar and syntax. On the blackboard you drew up meticulous columns, and introduced us to Parts of Speech, Parsing, Analysis. You showed us how to take a sentence apart, identify its components, and fit them back together with a fresh understanding of the way they worked.

One day you listed the functions of the adverb. You said, 'An adverb can modify an adjective.' Until that moment I had known only that adverbs modified verbs: *they laughed loudly; merrily we roll along*. I knew I was supposed to be scratching away with my dip pen, copying the list into my exercise book, but I was so excited by this

new idea that I put up my hand and said, 'Mrs Dunkley, how can an adverb modify an adjective?'

You paused, up there in front of the board with the pointer in your hand. My cheeks were just about to start burning when I saw on your face a mysterious thing. It was a tiny, crooked smile. You looked at me for a long moment—a slow, careful, serious look. You looked at me, and, for the first time, I knew that you had seen me.

'Here's an example,' you said, in an almost intimate tone. '*The wind was terribly cold.*'

I got it, and you saw me get it. Then your face snapped shut.

I never lost my terror of you, nor you your savage contempt. But if arithmetic lessons continued to be a hell of failure and derision, your English classes were a paradise of branching and blossoming knowledge.

Many years later, dear Mrs Dunkley, when I had turned you into an entertaining ogre from my childhood whose antics made people laugh and shudder, when I had published four books and felt at last that I could call myself a writer, I had a dream about you. In this dream I walked along the sandstone veranda of the school where you had taught me, and looked in through the French doors of the staffroom. Instead of the long tables at which the teachers of my childhood used to sit, marking exercise books and inventing horrible tests and exams, I saw a bizarre and miraculous scene.

I saw you, Mrs Dunkley, moving in slow motion across the staffroom—but instead of your grim black 1940s wool suit, you were dressed in a jacket made of some wondrously tender and flexible material, like suede or buckskin, in soft, unstable colours that streamed off you into the air in wavy bands and ribbons and garlands, so that as you walked you drew along behind you a thick, smudged rainbow trail.

In 1996 I described this dream in the introduction to a collection

of my essays. A few months after the book came out, I received a letter from a stranger. She had enjoyed my book, she said, particularly the introduction. She enclosed a photo that she thought I might like to see.

The photo shows a woman and a teenage girl standing in front of a leafy tree, in a suburban backyard. It's an amateurish black-and-white snap of a mother and daughter: it cuts off both subjects at the ankles. The girl is dressed in a gingham school uniform. Her haircut places the picture in about 1960. She is slightly taller than the woman, and is looking at the camera with the corners of her mouth drawn back into her cheeks; but her eyes are not smiling; they are wary and guarded.

The woman in the photo is in her late forties. She has short, dark, wavy hair combed back off her forehead. Her brows are dark and level, her nose thin, her lips firmly closed in an expression of bitter constraint. Deep, hard lines bracket her mouth. She's wearing a straight black skirt and a black cardigan undone to show a neat white blouse buttoned to the neck. Her hands are hanging by her sides.

I showed the photo to my husband. 'What enormous hands!' he said.

I knew your hands, Mrs Dunkley. Not that they ever touched me, but I recall them as thin and sinewy and fierce looking, with purplish skin that seemed fragile. They quivered, in 1952, with what I thought was rage, as you skimmed your scornful pencil-point down my wonky long divisions and multiplications.

'My mother,' wrote the stranger in her letter, 'was an alcoholic.'

I thought I knew you, Mrs Dunkley. I thought that by writing about you I had tamed you and made you a part of me. But when I looked at that photo, I felt as if I'd walked into a strange room at night, and something imperfectly familiar had turned to me in the dark. The real Mrs Dunkley shifted out from under the grid of

my creation, and I saw you at last, my teacher: an intense, damaged, dreadfully unhappy woman, only just holding on, fronting up to the school each morning, buttoned into your black clothes, savagely impatient, craving, suffering: a lost soul.

Dear Mrs Dunkley. You're long gone, and I'm nearly seventy. But, oh, I wish you weren't dead. I've got some things here that I wouldn't be ashamed to show you. And I've got something I want to say. I would like to thank you. It's probably what you would have called *hyperbole*, but, Mrs Dunkley, you taught me everything I know. Other teachers, later, consolidated it. But you were the one who laid the groundwork. You showed me the glory and the power of an English sentence and the skills I would need to build one. You put into my hands the tools for the job.

Dear Mrs Dunkley. I know that your first name was Grace; I hope you found some, in the end. Please accept, in whatever afterlife you earned or were vouchsafed, the enduring love, the sincere respect, and the eternal gratitude of your Great Moon Calf, Helen.

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